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THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS, ABRAHAM'S BOSOM, AND THE BIBLICAL PENALTY *KARET* ("CUT OFF")

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***Abstract**: The post-death setting of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) is unusual. Many have assumed that the place Lazarus is taken after he dies, "Abraham's bosom," is in heaven. However, Hippolytus (ca. 170–236), called by the* Catholic Encyclopedia *"the most important theologian and the most prolific religious writer of the Roman Church in the pre-Constantinian era," believed that* hades *is the equivalent of* sheol*, a place where "the souls of the* righteous and unrighteous *are detained," separated by a gulf, and that "Abraham's bosom" is a name for where the righteous are kept, in peace, in* hades. *To be in "Abraham's bosom" is synonomous with being "gathered to one's fathers" after death, awaiting eventual resurrection. This viewpoint suggests that the OT penalty of being "cut off" (*karet*) means to be cut off from one's fathers after death, the fate of the rich man.*

***Key Words**: Rich Man and Lazarus, Dives, Lazarus, Abraham's bosom,* hades*,* sheol*,* karet*, Hippolytus, Luke 16:19–31, parable*

For many centuries, most of those commenting on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus have assumed that the place Lazarus is taken after he dies, "Abraham's bosom," is in heaven, but this has not always been the case. In this essay, I will show that Jesus's listeners probably understood "Abraham's bosom" to be a region in *sheol* or *hades* populated by the righteous and that to "be gathered to" one's "fathers" was the equivalent of being among the righteous in the place of the dead. I will also suggest that the rich man is an example of those who—to use the OT phrase—have been "cut off." He has been "cut off" from fellowship with his "fathers," his righteous ancestors, and so from the hope of eternal life with God.

I. ROCK MY SOUL IN THE BOSOM OF ABRAHAM?

The meaning of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (found only in Luke 16:19–31) is readily discovered, and most of the parable is clear enough, but the post-death setting beginning with verse 22 is unusual.

In the OT, when *sheol*, the place of the dead, is mentioned, few details are given. David's understanding of death is revealed in Ps 6:5: "For in death there is no remembrance of you," he says to God, then asks, "in Sheol who can give you praise?"[1] The unnamed author of Ps 115:17 has similar views: "The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence." The Teacher, with his

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[1] All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

usual pessimism, claims, "The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost" (Eccl 9:5).[2] Job, immersed in his suffering, says to his friends, "Mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep" (14:12).[3]

However, as Alan E. Bernstein writes, "There is no one statement that can describe the "position" of the Hebrew Bible on a given subject, certainly not on the question of divine punishment and justice. We cannot define a Jewish position by quoting one line of Scripture, or even a collection of isolated lines."[4]

Sheol is often seen as merely a metaphor for the grave. Indeed, the NIV translates the word as "grave" fifty-five times. Still, in the OT it is portrayed not only as the grave but the netherworld, the place of "shades"[5] and shadow, "the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness" (Job 10:22).[6] There are passages where the dead in *sheol* are said to speak and stare, such as Isa 14:9–11, 16–18, and Ezek 31:15–18, though Galenieks has demonstrated that these passages were meant to be understood metaphorically, not literally.[7]

By the time of Jesus, aided by the influence of several centuries under Greek rule, with its attractive culture, these metaphorical passages were sometimes understood more literally, especially in the folk culture,[8] and *sheol* was sometimes equated

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[2] Qoheleth is hardly a reliable guide along the road of loving discipleship, but in this case he seems to echo the most common OT belief about death.

[3] It seems likely that in this verse, as in the ones above, the speaker is not denying a future resurrection to eternal life (if he were, this would contradict the most likely reading of Job 19:25–27). Rather, he is asserting what was plainly true to him—he had no reason to expect the dead to be raised in this world. We have the examples of the resurrection miracles of Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, and more, yet at a funeral we don't expect the corpse to sit up. Job did not have these examples.

Summarizing Christoph Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* (Zurich: Zollikon, 1947), 53–66, Nicholas J. Tromp writes, in *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (BibOr 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), "Locations of Sheol are primarily to be understood as descriptions [i.e. figuratively]. Attempts at a reconstruction of the antique world-picture are foredoomed to failure. … Sheol's being called 'deep' is first of all to be interpreted as an expression of the distance between the domain of death and the land of the living: anybody who is in Sheol is removed and alienated from God and the human community, and therefore from life" (p. 130). Tromp thinks Barth goes too far, however.

[4] *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 176.

[5] Tromp writes, on the *rephaîm*, sometimes translated as "shades" or "departed spirits," "The conception of a shadowy, flaccid existence of the dead cannot be associated with the title Rephaim." The evidence from the etymology of the word, including its occurrence in Ugaritic, "is of no use for better understanding of the term" (180).

[6] See S. Jellicoe, "Hebrew-Greek Equivalents for the Nether World, Its Milieu and Inhabitants in the Old Testament," *Text* 8 (1973): 1–19.

[7] Eriks Galenieks, "The Nature, Function, and Purpose of Sheol in the Book of Ezekiel" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the ETS, Colorado Springs, November 15, 2002). Galenieks wrote his dissertation at Andrews University on the word *sheol*.

[8] There is a general tendency, across cultures and throughout history, for the populace (even the educated populace) to mistake figurative or metaphorical language for literal language. Thus, the metaphorical OT language in which the dead rise up to greet a newly dead king (Isa 14:9–11)—in contradiction to many other OT verses—could be seen, if misread as literal, as quite similar to some of the Greek

with the Greek *hades*.[9] While Jesus and others refer metaphorically to the dead being asleep,[10] meaning that the dead have the potential of returning to life, it seems likely that a large percentage of Jews in Jesus's day—whether sanctioned by Scripture or not—conceived of *sheol* as a place where the dead could know or speak.[11] Whether or not Jesus himself believed this—I do not think he did—is immaterial. It would be appropriate for him, in telling a parable, to draw on the folk beliefs of his listeners,[12] just as he drew on their knowledge of agriculture, travel, and master-servant relationships.[13]

What happens, though, to Lazarus when he dies? Hultgren, in his analysis of this parable, writes, "The poor man is carried away by angels, escorted into heaven with their aid."[14] This has been the usual reading over the centuries. But does the

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conceptions of *hades*. While much of the OT is meant to be read literally, when we read poetry we are in the land of metaphor.

[9] Indeed, by the time the LXX was produced, *hades* was seen as the best translation of *sheol*. (The extent to which the LXX translators may have taken literally what was meant metaphorically is not clear.)

[10] Matt 9:24; 27:52; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; John 11:11; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 5:10. In Jer 51:39, Yahweh describes the death he will inflict on the Babylonians as "a perpetual sleep" from which they will "never wake." Many have discounted the passages referring to death as sleep because they have failed to see it as metaphor. Taken literally, the texts are seen as wrong because we ourselves can awaken those who sleep, but not those who die.

[11] A study of the pseudepigrapha written before and after the time of Jesus reveals that speculation about an afterlife was rampant, with a variety of opinions coexisting, ranging from the non-existence of the soul or of any resurrection to several forms of metempsychosis. Various types of Greek speculation were influential. Other influences included Egyptian and Persian. However, *sheol*, whatever it was taken to mean, was a Hebrew concept, and if read literally it could be understood to be similar to the idea of *hades*. It seems likely that this comes closest to a majority concept in Jesus's day, even though this is quite different from the general OT teaching.

However, in Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 33:5, probably written in Hebrew shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, the prophetess Deborah is quoted as saying, "While a man is still alive he can pray for himself and for his sons, but after his end he cannot pray or be mindful of anyone." Translation by D. J. Harrington, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:297–377. Thus, the OT view of death was not forgotten in Jesus's day.

[12] See Kendrick Grobel, "… Whose Name Was Neves," *NTS* 10 (1963–1964): 373–82; Ronald F. Hock, "Lazarus and Micyllus: Greco–Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19–31," *JBL* 106 (1987): 447–63; Richard Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels," *NTS* 37 (1991): 225–46; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV)* (AB 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1126–27. None of these authors mentions the "Abraham's bosom" explanation by Hippolytus that I will soon introduce.

[13] There is a necessary tension between the words of Jesus, spoken usually to the common people of Palestine, and the writing of Luke, meant for an audience of Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles outside of Palestine. In a way, Luke is a "foreign affairs correspondent," facing the difficulty of translating a culture as well as a story. Everyone in his audience could be expected to understand the general idea of *hades* because it was a staple of Greek culture, though with various pictures of it in their minds. References to "Abraham's bosom," however, would be understood by only a few. The fact that Luke chose to preserve this confusing phrase rather than use a synonym, such as "the place reserved for the righteous dead," testifies to the likelihood that he is faithfully passing on the parable as he received it from his source.

[14] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 113. In support of this he cites T. Ash. 6:5 and 1 En. 22:1–14. However, Testament of Asher speaks of the soul departing, but does not say where. It could as well be down as up. In 1 Enoch, the wicked and the righteous reside in different hollows of one large rock, awaiting their final fate. Nothing in the text places

text say he was "escorted into heaven"? No, it says he was "carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" (*kólpon Abraám*; v. 22 [KJV])[15]. The NRSV phrases it "to be with Abraham." The NIV says he was carried "to Abraham's side." What does that mean?

I was startled to find the answer to the question of where Lazarus goes in "An Extract Out of Josephus' Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades," found in William Whiston's 18th-century translation of *The Works of Josephus*.[16] Actually, the Jewish historian Josephus did not write this but Whiston thought he did, so he included it.[17] Almost certainly, it was written by the Christian bishop Hippolytus (ca. 170–236), called by the *Catholic Encyclopedia* "the most important theologian and the most prolific religious writer of the Roman Church in the pre-Constantinian era."[18] If Josephus had written the work, we would know what a Jew thought "Abraham's bosom" meant a few decades after Jesus's time. Instead, we know what an important Christian theologian understood it to mean two centuries after Jesus told the parable.[19]

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these righteous ones in heaven. This is merely Hultgren's assumption based on his theological presuppositions.

A. J. Mattill Jr. offers a different analysis of 1 Enoch 22 in *Luke and the Last Things: A Perspective for the Understanding of Lukan Thought* (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1979), 26–32. He writes, "The Hades of 1 Enoch 22 is divided so as to separate the righteous from the unrighteous. Likewise the Hades of Luke 16 is divided, with a 'great gulf fixed' (16:26) between Dives in one division and Lazarus, we may suppose, in the other, in the place of honor at a feast, at the table reclining in Abraham's bosom (cf. John 13:23). The phrase 'great gulf' (*chasma mega*) is found in the NT only in Luke 16:26, but it also occurs in 1 Enoch 18:11, where it is used of a deep abyss." Mattill provides a number of other linguistic passages between the two tales.

He continues: "But whatever the precise relationship between Luke 16:19–31 and 1 Enoch, it seems quite probable that Luke has handed down to us Enoch's popular conception of Hades as a divided intermediate state, with Lazarus in the happy side, which includes Abraham's bosom and the fountain of magical, living water [found in 1 Enoch], and Dives in the unhappy side, separated by a great chasm. Here Dives and Lazarus experience preliminary blessing and punishment and await the resurrection, when the souls in Hades will be united with their bodies to stand in the last judgment. This was the view held in the church until about A.D. 200" (p. 31).

His conclusion is noteworthy: "In short, the NT concept of Hades in general and the Lukan concept in particular indicates that Luke did not platonize apocalyptic eschatology either by adopting the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul or by surrendering the present-future tension between the two ages in favor of a vertical tension between heaven and earth" (p. 32).

[15] J. A. Motyer writes, "*kolpos* means 'bosom', by synecdoche 'person'; especially with connotations of love, close relationship etc. It is related to *kolpoo*, to swell out (e.g. as sail in wind). Hence *kolpos* as the human 'bosom', the 'bosom' of a garment, of the sea (originally referring to sea-goddess), bay, valley." *NIDOTTE* 1:240, entry on "Body."

[16] *The Works of Josephus* (new updated ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 813; also available on many websites without comment.

[17] Steve Mason, general editor of the ten-volume Brill commentary on Josephus now in progress, writes, in an email (May 23, 2002), "We may be confident that Josephus did not write it, and no scholar today who is accredited in the field would attribute it to him."

[18] http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07360c.htm.

[19] The interesting story of how Hippolytus was established as the author is given by David Dunbar in "The Problem of Hippolytus of Rome: A Study in Historical-Critical Reconstruction," *JETS* 25 (1982): 63–74. The major extant work of Hippolytus, the *Elenchos* or *Refutation of All Heresies* or *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, had not yet been discovered in the days of Whiston, the best-known translator of

Hippolytus, writing in Greek to Greeks, wrote that *hades* is where "the souls of the *righteous and unrighteous* are detained."[20] *Hades*, he wrote, is subterranean, and it receives no light from the surface: "And in this locality there is a certain place set apart by itself, a lake of unquenchable fire, into which we suppose no one has ever yet been cast; for it is prepared against the day determined by God, in which one sentence of righteous judgment shall be justly applied to all."[21] The fate Hippolytus sees for the righteous during their time in *hades*, awaiting the resurrection, deserves fuller quotation:

> For to this locality there is one descent, at the gate whereof we believe an archangel is stationed with a host. And when those who are conducted by the angels appointed unto the souls have passed through this gate, they do not proceed on one and the same way; but the righteous, being conducted in the light toward the right, and being hymned by the angels stationed at the place, are brought to a locality full of light. And *there the righteous from the beginning dwell*, not ruled by necessity, but enjoying always the contemplation of the blessings which are in

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Josephus. In *Haer.* 10:28, the author identifies himself as the author of *Concerning the Substance of the Universe*. (I am giving the name as given by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, where it is found in 5:221–23. Dunbar translates it *On the Essence of the Universe*.) Dunbar confirms that scholars accept these two works as being by the same author, Hippolytus (p. 68). This is the same work Whiston calls "An Extract Out of Josephus' Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades."

Whiston attributed the work to Josephus on the basis of the comments of several medieval church fathers who attribute it to *Iosepos*. We do not know why this name appears on the Greek manuscripts. Dunbar speculates that it might have been due to a miscopying of an unfamiliar abbreviation of the name Hippolytus. I think certain sentences reminded someone of Josephus, so a tentative author was written down and came to be seen as the actual author. Pierre Nautin, in his book *Hippolyte et Josipe* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1947), argued on the basis of this name *Iosepos* that both the *Refutation* and *On the Essence of the Universe* were written by a previously unknown important bishop named Josipe—not the Jewish historian. He claimed it was this Josipe—not Hippolytus—who was the great scholar and "antipope" who stood against the corrupt and "heretical" Roman bishops (now called popes) Callistus, Urban, and Pontian and died a martyr. Dunbar writes, "Nautin's thesis has from the first been virtually unanimously rejected by patristic scholars" (p. 74).

How did these works come to be attributed to Hippolytus? Eusebius devotes a paragraph to naming the works of Hippolytus (*Hist. eccl.* 6.22), but except for a few fragments, including *On the Essence of the Universe*, supposedly written by *Iosepos*, they were all unknown. During the Renaissance an impressive statue of a seated figure was found in Rome, above the catacomb where Hippolytus was thought to have been buried. The name of this figure was not given but carved on his chair was a list of his works and a calendar for determining the date of Easter, beginning around AD 225. Some of the works named and the calendar are attributed to Hippolytus in Eusebius, so the figure could be identified. In the 1840s, Books 3–10 of the *Refutation* were found (Book 1 had been known before but was thought to be by Origen). In the *Refutation*, the author mentions several of his works—and they are carved in the statue. Thus, by a triangulation of the titles on the statue, the titles in the *Refutation*, and the titles mentioned by Eusebius, the author was found to be Hippolytus.

[20] Emphasis added.

[21] I am quoting from the text as translated in *ANF*. Whiston provides a variorum edition of the four Greek manuscript copies from which he drew (pp. 877–79), should one care to check this in the Greek, and where I give the Greek words I am drawing from that. There are, of course, many slight differences between the Whiston and the *ANF* translations, but they are clearly drawing on the same Greek text. We do well, perhaps, to bear in mind the concluding sentence of Miroslav Markovich's article, "Textual Criticism on Hippolytus' *Refutatio*," *JTS* 19 (1968): 83–92: "The existing text of *Refutatio* is badly damaged, highly corrupt, and inadequately edited." The same may apply to this text.

> their view, and delighting themselves with the expectation of others ever new, and deeming those even better than these. And that place brings no toils to them. There, there is neither fierce heat, nor cold, nor thorn; but *the face of the fathers and the righteous* is seen to be always smiling, as they wait for the rest and eternal revival [Whiston: "new life"] in heaven which succeed this location. And *we call it by the name Abraham's bosom* [*kólpon Abraám*].[22]

We see, thus, that to this Christian writer, "Abraham's bosom," where the righteous now dwell, is not heaven but *hades*.[23] What we see is an imaginative, hellenized, literalized version of the more abstract OT metaphorical concept called *sheol*.[24] Would Christians have called this place "Abraham's bosom" without learning the term from the gospel of Luke? Probably not. But this does tell us that two centuries after Christ, this is what the "most important theologian and the most prolific religious writer" of his day thought Christ meant when he used the term.

However, the picture presented above is also in line with what Josephus did write in the years after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. In *The Antiquities of the Jews*, in a paragraph describing the beliefs of the Pharisees, we find the following:

> They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again.[25]

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[22] Emphasis added.

[23] Paul Haupt, in his article "Abraham's Bosom" (*AJP* 42 [1921]: 162–67), provides strong evidence that in the Hebrew Bible the word translated "bosom" generally meant "lap." He concludes, "For Lazarus in Abraham's bosom or, rather, in Abraham's lap, we must … think of … Michelangelo's marble group *Pietà* at St. Peter's in Rome … representing the Virgin with the body of the dead Christ on her lap." This provides a striking image, but for Hippolytus, "Abraham's bosom" is clearly a metaphor for the underground gathering place for those who will be with God following their resurrection. This group might be seen as parallel to "those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev 21:27). They are, of course, buried all over the world, but God knows where they are.

[24] Joseph Osei-Bonsu writes, "It is likely that Abraham's bosom was located in Hades. A great gulf is said to separate Lazarus and the rich man, and this suggests that their abodes faced each other. The probability that their abodes were in Hades is suggested by the Egyptian folk tale which underlies the Lucan story. In the Egyptian story both the publican and the student are in different sections of the *same* region of the underworld (Amnte); the same may be true of the Lucan account. Thus 'Abraham's bosom', where Lazarus is, and 'this place of torment', where Dives is, represent respectively the blessed and unblessed sections of Hades" ("The Intermediate State in the New Testament," *SJT* 44 [1991]: 169–94 [175]).

Osei-Bonsu also suggests that the "Paradise" Jesus promises to the thief on the cross is the equivalent of "Abraham's bosom." He writes, "In view of the fact that Luke in Ac. 2:27, 31, regarded Christ's soul as going to Hades, it is possible that he regarded Paradise here, like Abraham's bosom, as the blessed section of Hades, the intermediate state. Thus Jesus may be promising the criminal that he would be with him that day in the paradisiacal section of Hades where the righteous souls await resurrection [he cites Mattill, 33–34]. J. D. Tabor expresses a similar view when he says of Lk. 23:43 that 'it seems to refer to a blessed place for the departed righteous, probably located in the lower Hadean world'" [citing James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 117, 126 n. 9].

[25] *Ant.* 18.1.3.

We do well to bear in mind Bernstein's caution: "Josephus had an unusual and highly personal relationship to Greco-Roman culture. His description of Jewish thought gives it more Greek philosophical overtones than it probably had in reality."[26] Still, this is closely in line with Jesus's parable, whether or not it is in line with Jesus's own beliefs, and it is also in line with Hippolytus. What a shock for Christians, however, to find that the righteous are not in heaven but in *hades*![27]

What could have led so many readers to assume Abraham and his bosom were in heaven? Luke 16:23 reads, "In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side." The literal translation is not "looked up" but "lifting up the eyes." Readers without access to the textual tools we have might assume that "lifting up the eyes" meant looking up into the air. However, the phrase is a Hebrew idiomatic expression that usually means "looking."[28]

Does anything else in the parable suggest that the rich man was looking up to heaven? No. Verse 26 reads, "Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass [*diabainō*, to step across or cross over] from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us [*diaperaō*, to pass over or cross over]." A "chasm" usually separates two things that are more or less on the same level. It's not the usual word for separating something above from something below. Similarly, we don't "step across" or "cross over" from one stair to the next, or from earth to heaven. We step across a crack or cross over a river or a street from one side to the other. Thus, we should imagine the rich man with his eyes down. He lifts his eyes to a horizontal position—in *hades*—and across a chasm he sees "Father Abraham."[29] The rich man does not speak to Lazarus, and there is no sign at all in the parable that Lazarus sees or hears him.[30] Only Father Abraham speaks to him.

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[26] Berstein, *Formation of Hell*, 178.

[27] Revelation 6:9 reads, "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given." In temple language, what is "under the altar" is below ground level, even though in very good company—this is where the drink offerings and the blood from sacrifices was poured. Thus, this too points to the righteous being preserved safely underground until the day of Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead.

[28] The phrase used in the Greek in Luke 16:23 is also found in John 4:35, where Jesus invites his disciples to lift up their eyes and see that the fields are ripe for harvest. He is not suggesting that the fields are on mountaintops or in the sky. The Hebrew idiom occurs more than four dozen times. Sometimes the context reveals that it does mean looking up—to heaven, or the hills. Usually, however, the idiom suggests an eye movement from looking down to looking out or looking at. Among the texts supporting this are Gen 13:10; 18:2; 22:4, 13; 24:63, 64; 33:1; Exod 14:10; Deut 3:27; Isa 49:18; 60:4; Jer 13:20; Ezek 8:5; 23:27.

[29] Hippolytus wrote, of the wicked looking at the righteous in *hades*, "And again, where they see *the place of the fathers* and the righteous, they are also punished there. For a deep and vast abyss is set there in the midst, so that neither can any of the righteous in sympathy think to pass it, nor any of the unrighteous dare to cross it" (emphasis added). (Note that by the time of Hippolytus those in Abraham's bosom are aware of those cut off from it by the chasm, but this may be due to Greek influence, and it goes beyond the words of the parable.)

[30] In Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 33:5, the prophetess Deborah is quoted as saying, "While a man is still alive he can pray for himself and for his sons, but after his end he cannot pray or be mindful

II. "CUT OFF" FROM HIS FATHERS

Hippolytus tells us those in "Abraham's bosom" get to enjoy "the face of the *fathers* and the righteous." The understanding here is that the righteous ones are taken to where their righteous ancestors are, while the wicked go elsewhere.[31] The rich man can never cross over to "Father Abraham," and Abraham can never cross over to him. God has "cut off" the rich man from his "fathers" by placing a chasm between them.

In Gen 17:14, God says to Abraham, "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." What does it mean to be "cut off" [Heb. *karet*]? Scholars have argued about this for centuries. The phrase occurs many times in the OT. Does "cut off from his people" mean a person is to be executed by his people? Does it mean God will execute the person? Does it mean the person will die young, or earlier than God had planned? Does it mean the person must be exiled from his people, and if so, temporarily or permanently?

The best brief explanation of the meaning of "cut off" I have found is by Jacob Milgrom in his commentary on the book of Numbers.[32] Milgrom writes:

> The other possible meaning of *karet* is that the punishment is indeed executed upon the sinner but only after his death; that is, he is not permitted to rejoin his ancestors in the afterlife (example 5). This meaning is supported by the idiom that is its opposite in meaning: *ne'esaf 'el*, "be gathered to one's [kin, fathers]" (e.g. Num. 20:24; 27:13; 31:2). Particularly in regard to the patriarchs, the language of the Bible presumes three stages concerning their death: They die, they are gathered to their kin, and they are buried (cf. Gen. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33).[33] "It (the

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of anyone. Therefore do not hope in your fathers. For they will not profit you at all unless you be found like them." Similarly, if Lazarus is "mindful" of anyone, the text does not say.

[31] An interesting twist on this is found in 2 Sam 12:23, where David says, in regard to his dead baby son, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

[32] Excursus 36, "The Penalty of 'Karet,'" in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 405–8. Milgrom is drawing on the work of his student Donald J. Wold, whose 1978 dissertation on the topic is titled "The Biblical Penalty of Kareth." This is also the position of Maimonides in Yad, Teshuvah 8:1, and of Ramban on Lev 20:2.

[33] I would modify this by pointing out that in only two passages are being gathered to one's people and burial mentioned together: Gen 25:8–10 and 35:29. We would naturally expect burial to follow death, rather than precede it, and it is done to one by others, not by oneself, so calling burial a "stage" may be a bit less than precise. One thing follows the next, but there is no cause and effect relationship between being gathered and being buried, though there is between dying and being buried. However, it is significant that none of these people are said to have been gathered to their fathers before death—death comes first. Milgrom is correct to note that the gathering *follows* death. In all of these texts, it is the person who does the dying, of course, but people do not *gather themselves* to their fathers, and those who bury them do not do that gathering for them by burying them. The texts say these people "were gathered," but only one says who does the gathering. In 2 Kgs 22:20, God says through the prophetess Huldah that it is he who does the gathering. These texts also do not say that the fathers recognized them or that the people gathered were sentient. This is in line with the texts quoted on the first page of this essay. Perhaps we should see being gathered to one's fathers not as a reference to an afterlife, as Milgrom does, but as a veiled sign of hope and of confidence that the person deserves a place among the ancestors, not cut off from them.

> term 'gathered') designates something which succeeds death and precedes burial, the kind of thing which may hardly be considered as other than reunion with the ancestors in Sheol."[34] This biblical idiom has its counterpart in the bordering river civilizations of Egypt ("going to one's Ka") and of Mesopotamia ("joining the ghosts of one's ancestors"),[35] all of which is evidence for a belief in the afterlife that permeated the ancient world and for the concomitant fear that a wrathful deity might deprive man of this boon. This interpretation would be in keeping with *karet* as an individual not a collective retribution.[36]

Milgrom is correct to find belief in an afterlife in other cultures—reminding us again of people's tendency to take literally what is meant figuratively—and this also no doubt influences some of the more colorful comments on Sheol in the OT, as if the prophets were using the language of the nations around them to describe the fate God has determined for them. However, the pertinent texts in the OT are remarkable for never portraying this gathering to the fathers as an afterlife. The fathers are not welcoming those who join them. The language seems to imply no more than their being together in the grave, or under the ground. These verses probably led in time to Jesus's parable, but they are a long way from it. What interests me in Milgrom's statement is the light it sheds on the fate of the rich man in the parable and the meaning of *karet*.

If to be "gathered to his people" implies being numbered among God's people who have died faithful, consider the effect of that understanding in the following verses:

- Gen 25:8: Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.
- Gen 25:17: (This is the length of the life of Ishmael, one hundred thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.)
- Gen 35:29: And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.
- Gen 49:33: When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.
- Deut 32:50: you shall die there on the mountain that you ascend and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin.
- Judg 2:10: Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.
- 2 Kgs 22:20: "Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place."

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[34] Citing B. Alfrink, "L'expression *ne'esap 'el 'amayw*," *OTS* 5 (1948): 128.

[35] Citing Wold, n.p.

[36] Milgrom has earlier discussed the possibility that *karet* means the extirpation of not only an individual but of all his descendents.

- Jdt 16:22: Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people.
- 1 Macc 2:69: Then he blessed them, and was gathered to his ancestors.
- 1 Macc 14:30: Jonathan rallied the nation, became their high priest, and was gathered to his people.[37]

This may also help us understand why Joseph insisted that his bones be returned "to the land that he [God] swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." As he saw it, perhaps, he could not be "gathered to his people" unless his bones were taken back to be with the bones of his people.[38]

It is clear from Josephus and from Hippolytus that according to their conception, the righteous who are in "Abraham's bosom" are resting with their ancestors in *hades*, free from pain, in anticipation of resurrection and eternal life with God.[39] This blessed hope is less clear in the OT than we would wish, but it is not un-

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[37] I include these texts from the Apocrypha to show that the idiom was still current in the Second Temple period.

[38] A related term is to *sleep* with one's fathers (1 Kgs 2:10; 11:43; 15:8; 2 Kgs 10:35). However, Tromp summarizes Alfrink on this term (pp. 168–71). Alfrink believes that "to sleep with one's fathers"—as distinct from being gathered to one's fathers—is simply a synonym for death, as the word *môt* never occurs in the same verse. The phrase is always used in reference to kings who have died a natural death, and never in reference to commoners or those who have died violently. This is in line with Isa 14:18–20, where we also see a separation between entombed kings and those who die violently and are not buried in state. On the other hand, Pseudo-Philo 33:6, reads, "And Deborah died and slept with her fathers and was buried in the city of her fathers." Thus, by NT times, the phrase was not reserved for kings, if it ever was—or even for men.

[39] Fitzmyer writes of "Abraham's bosom," "It probably represents a development of the OT idea of sleeping with one's fathers or ancestors." He adds, "In this parable Hades is a locale distinct from 'Abraham's bosom,' with a great chasm separating them. But it may be that two different locales in Sheol are really meant" (p. 1132). He cites L. W. Grensted, "The Use of Enoch in St. Luke xvi. 19–31," *ExpTim* 26 (1914–15): 333–34. Grensted's concluding remark deserves quotation: "It seems difficult to believe that these are accidental coincidences, especially in the case of the words *chasma* (gulf), *zoe* (lifetime), and *basanos* (torment). But if not we must conclude that the whole parable is based on Enoch, and, in particular, the problem whether Lazarus was also 'in Hades' has found its solution."

Tractate *Kiddushin* 72a of the Babylonian Talmud (Soncino Talmud) notes of "Abraham's bosom," "Some say that this is a euphemism for death." Louis Ginzberg writes, in *The Legends of the Jews* (1925; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), "The pious are gathered to their fathers (4 Maccabees 12:17; BHM V, 50), and, accordingly, 'to be in Abraham's bosom' is abridged from the complete expression 'to be in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,' the three patriarchs" (5:268).

The part of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus called "Christ's descent into Hell" [II (XVIII); probably written in the 4th century, though more interpolations were added thereafter] describes those in Hades in these words: "We, then, were in Hades with all who have died since the beginning of the world. And at the hour of midnight there rose upon the darkness there something like the light of the sun and shone, and light fell upon us all, and we saw one another. And immediately our father Abraham, along with the patriarchs and the prophets, was filled with joy" (trans. Felix Scheidweiler in *New Testament Apocrypha* [rev. ed.; ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; ET R. McL. Wilson; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991], 522). This "harrowing of hell" story has a long history in apocryphal books and was a favorite motif in medieval religious literature, but it was developed far beyond the ambiguous scriptural evidence. What is significant here, however, is that some four centuries after Christ, the righteous, including Abraham and the fathers, are still thought to have been in Hades at the time of the crucifixion. By literalizing what is metaphorical, however, these writers came to imagine Christ emptying Hades of the righteous. This is not envisioned in the parable under discussion.

known. The prophet Daniel is told, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2). Then he is told, in the last verse of the book, "But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days." Job says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:25–27).

By this light, we see that in Jesus's parable, the rich man has been "cut off" from "Father Abraham," and so evidently from the rest of "the fathers." They are all in *hades*, but the rich man is "tormented," while Lazarus is "comforted." The rich man has suffered the penalty of *karet*, and between him and his fathers is a chasm he cannot cross over. Meanwhile, Lazarus, though a beggar in life, is with "the fathers" in death, awaiting the resurrection.[40]

I myself agree with the psalmist when he says, "For in death there is no remembrance of you," and asks, "in Sheol who can give you praise?" (Ps 6:5). I believe that both the righteous and the wicked are in the grave, awaiting the resurrection and their eternal reward, for good or ill. I believe the Pharisees and people of Jesus's day had taken OT figurative language as literal while ignoring more literal verses. Why then did Jesus use such language? Was he not confirming the truth of their beliefs? No, I think he was, rather, meeting people where they were, explaining the truth in terms they would remember and understand, even though the story was not literally true.

There is a word for using what is imagined to explain what is transcendent: parable. Those who prefer to believe this parable is not a parable at all but a revelation of something that had actually happened, however, or of the actual state of the dead, must now accustom themselves to the revelation that their loved ones are not in heaven after all, but in *hades*, awaiting the resurrection.[41] This is the literal meaning of the text.

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[40] In Pseudo-Philo 40:4, we find another mention of the "bosom," though with an unusual usage. God says, about the daughter of Jephthah, "Her death will be precious before me always, and she will go away and fall into the bosom of her mothers." (It is interesting that in 33:2, Deborah says, "Listen now, my people. Behold I am warning you as a woman of God and am enlightening you as one from the female race; and obey me like your mother and heed my words as people who will also die." This motherly authority is rare indeed in the Bible, more's the pity.)

[41] The parable, whether literal or figurative, also makes it clear that neither the righteous nor the wicked dead can return to this world to give messages. This negates the possibility that what the witch of Endor saw "coming up out of the ground" was in fact Samuel or his spirit or ghost. However, it is significant that this man of God is said to come "up" (v. 16), rather than from some heavenly place, as this reinforces the idea of "Abraham's bosom" being understood to be part of Sheol in Jesus's day.