

#796 The Lazarus Story

Colleagues,

Once again we bring you a contribution from Bob Schultz and Rich Jungkuntz. They appeared together last year in [ThTheol #726](#). They continue to work together on a fresh English edition of Werner Elert's systematics text, *The Christian Faith*, Bob translating in Seattle while Rich reads and comments from his home in Thailand. They're also collaborating on other things, as you're about to see. Since what they send is self-explanatory, I'll make mention only of its timeliness. The Sunday will soon be here when preachers who follow the Revised Common Lectionary and related versions will be tackling the most challenging of all Jesus' parables, the grim little tale of the rich man and Lazarus. I fear that the American church will suffer from a dearth of Gospel that day. The same could well be true in other lands. May it be that the matters explored here will help some of you to preach the text properly and others of you to catch what you won't get to hear in the churches you attend.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

To Thursday Theology readers, from Robert C. Schultz—

Background:

Rich Jungkuntz was working through his father's files after his father died in 2003. (His father, Dick Jungkuntz, was one-time executive secretary of the LC-MS's Commission on Theology and Church Relations [CTCR] and had retired as provost of Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.) In his father's papers, he found a sheet with passages from Luke 16 and John 11

that feature a person named Lazarus. To see the sheet, click [here](#).

Rich's question is, what was his father thinking of as a possible further development of this comparison?

As Rich and I discussed this, we began to see that all of the references to Lazarus in the gospels of Luke and John can fit together in a single package. We make no claim to originality but report it because we found it useful.

Our first set of assumptions is from Archibald M. Hunter *According to John* (Philadelphia, Westminster: 1968):

p. 39: Peder Borgen thought that John followed an independent tradition but that at certain points in the Passion Story we find fused units from the oral tradition behind the synoptics. E.D. Johnston picked out five non-Markan features in John's story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand which had a good claim to be accounted historical, and so made a case for John's independence in this narrative. The American P. Parker, discussing the links between John and the synoptics, especially Luke, found that John did not know the synoptics. His links with them came from a common oral tradition; and it was possible that John and Luke worked in the same areas for a time and heard the same traditions about Jesus.
p. 41: In the fourth gospel's account of John the Baptist and the call of the first disciples, Dodd once again finds clear evidence of independent tradition.

p. 46: The story of the raising of Lazarus, as is well known, presents special difficulties. As it lies before us now, it has been "written up" by the evangelist; but in view of the circumstantial details it contains and the abundant evidence that St. John had access to good independent tradition, the one thing we ought not to do is to dismiss it as John's creation

out of nothing—or as a miraculous quilt made out of synoptic patches.

pp. 68-69: The raising of Lazarus proclaims Christ as the source of life—eternal life, life over which physical death has no power—"I am the resurrection and the life."

Today scholars agree that the whole burden of Jesus' preaching was the kingdom of God and its coming. The Kingdom, or Reign of God—an eschatological concept—signifies the sovereign activity of God in saving men and overcoming evil and the New Order of things thus established. Now it was the very heart of Jesus' "good news" that this New Order was no longer a shining hope on the far horizon but, in some sense, a present reality in his person and ministry. And for Jesus, as the synoptics indicate, his mighty works were signs of that Kingdom's coming and presence. They were tokens of the New Age in which the power of the living God was at work through his Messiah in hitherto unknown ways—encountering and defeating evil and the devil, whether it was the demonic distortion of a man's personality, or the assault of disease on his natural vitality and vigor, the foretaste of death, "the last enemy."

pp. 75-77: Much more perplexing for the modern Christian are the Sign at Cana, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and the raising of Lazarus.

In the light of what we have said about St. John and history we may well believe that John 2.1-12 is based on an actual historical situation at which Jesus somehow saved the situation for a village wedding party. The trouble is that the provision of one hundred twenty gallons of wine when men had already "drunk freely" is not an act of human prudence, still less of Divine Providence.

The story of the raising of Lazarus poses two problems. First:

did Jesus really raise Lazarus from the dead? To this we may reply (1) that Jesus himself did claim to raise the dead (Luke 7.22; Matt. 1.5, Q) and that the synoptics record stories of two such raisings—the widow of Nain's son and Jairus' daughter; and (2) that if Jesus is God Incarnate (as St. John and most Christians believe) we cannot pronounce the raising incredible.

The other problem is the fact that the synoptics do not record the raising of Lazarus—an event which, in John's review, made the Jewish authorities resolve on Jesus' death (11.55). According to Mark 11.18 it was the cleansing of the Temple—an event St. John set early in the ministry—which provoked their fatal intervention. Moreover, John's story of the raising of Lazarus, however much it owes its present form to his own dramatic skill, not only contains many life-like touches—one thinks of the delineation of the characters of Martha and Mary and the 'agitation' of Jesus (11.33)—but makes the story of the Triumphal Entry as recorded by Mark coherent for the first time. Now we know why the people of Jerusalem treated Jesus' entry as a royal progress. The only evangelist who gives a sufficient reason for this is John who explicitly says that it was the report of the raising of Lazarus.

We acknowledge that our reconstruction makes and also requires the reader to make these assumptions, at least for the purpose of discussion. In addition to the assumptions of Hunter (listed above), we also make our own independent assumptions:

- All the Lazarus stories are about one person.
- We assume that there was one larger story of Lazarus and Jesus and that Luke and John used various parts of this single story to make their individual points. On this basis, we attempt to reconstruct more of the whole story by placing the various gospel accounts into the context of

our larger story.

- In so doing, we have a description of what was happening for Lazarus during the three or four days when Jesus was not responding to the sisters' call for help and Lazarus had died.
- Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha in Bethany, did not come from a rich family. They were poor. Martha did her own (and sometimes Mary's) housework. (When we were young, we were assured in parochial school that Mary and Martha were not poor and that there were two Lazaruses, since the Lazarus who was the brother of Mary and Martha would not have been poor.)
- Putting all the stories together, we suggest the following as a possibility: There is a larger story about Lazarus and the rich man. Luke and John—in the manner of the Evangelists—pick out sections of that larger story and weave them into their gospel in order to achieve their own purposes. We have tried to reconstruct that larger story.

The passages highlighted by Dick Jungkuntz are in bold. He printed out and highlighted material in Luke 16:22-31 and John 11:43-53.

Lazarus is ill and hungry:

John 11:1-2: 1Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.)

Elsewhere in Bethany:

Luke 16:19-21: 19There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's

table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

Lazarus' sisters send a message to Jesus:

John 11:3-6: 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' 4But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Jesus tells a parable about the rich man:

Luke 12:16-23: 16Then Jesus told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 18Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." 22He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Lazarus dies:

Luke 16:22a: The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

The rich man dies:

Luke 16:22b: The rich man also died and was buried.

The rich man seeks help from Lazarus:

Luke 16:23-31: 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and **send Lazarus** to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." 25But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." 27He said, "Then, father, I beg you to **send him to my father's house**— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." 29Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." 30He said, "No, father Abraham; **but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.**" 31He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, **neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**"

Jesus decides to go to Bethany:

John 11:7-16: 7Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' 8The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' 9Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' 11After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' 12The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was

referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' 16Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

In Bethany, Jesus is informed of Lazarus' death:

John 11:17-37: 11When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' 23Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' 25Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 27She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

28When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her

also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' 37But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Jesus raises Lazarus:

John 11:38-44: 38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' 40Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, '**Lazarus, come out!**' 44The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Abraham's prediction that no one would believe because of a resurrection was more or less accurate:

John 11:45-53: 45Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. 46But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. 47**So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.** 48If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' 49But one of them, Caiaphas, who was

high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! 50You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' 51He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, 52and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53**So from that day on they planned to put him to death.**

Jesus visits Lazarus:

John 12:1-9: 1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' 6(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

9When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

Some believed because Jesus raised Lazarus, but others did not:

John 12:10-19:10So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, 11since it was on account of him that many of the

Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. 12The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!' 14Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!' 16His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. 17So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. 18It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. 19The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'