

SHORT STUDY

Abraham's Bosom, the Place Where he  
Belonged: A Short Note on ἀπενεχθῆναι in  
Luke 16.22

PIETER W. VAN DER HORST

*Faculty of Theology, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80105, NL 3508 TC Utrecht,  
The Netherlands*

In the story of the rich man and the poor Lazarus in Luke 16, the usual translation of v. 22 is: 'The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham', or 'he was carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham' (ἐγένετο δὲ ἀποθανεῖν τὸν πτωχὸν καὶ ἀπενεχθῆναι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγγέλων εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ). None of the dozens of existing translations of Luke and commentaries on his Gospel that I have consulted offer anything other than this. There is nothing wrong with this translation, except that the verb used here for carrying away, ἀποφέρειν, can have a semantic aspect that is not captured in this rendering, an aspect which I strongly suspect is present here. I submit as a translation of the verse the following free rendition: 'The poor man died and the angels carried him away to the bosom of Abraham, the place where he belonged (or: his well-deserved place)'.

In compound verbs beginning with ἀπο-, this preposition often has the connotation of 'back to where it belongs', or it gives the verb a notion of 'deservedness' or of what is due. To give a clear example from the New Testament: the verb ἀποδίδομι usually means 'to give away, to give up, to yield', but it also often has the semantic aspects of 'to meet or fulfill a contractual or other obligation, to pay out, to give back, to restore to the original possessor, to recompense, to reward'.<sup>1</sup> It is used in this way for paying out wages in Matt. 20.8; for paying back debts in Matt 5.26, Luke 7.42 and elsewhere; for giving due reward in Rom 2.6; for making 'repayments' to one's parents in 1 Tim 5.4 etc. (see also Rev 18.6 for a particularly good example). So time and again this verb is used for giving persons what is due to them or what they are entitled to.

Another example concerns the verb ἀπέχω: when in Matthew 6 Jesus repeatedly (vv. 2, 5, 16) says of 'the hypocrites' that they ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν, he means that they have been paid here and now what was due to them, so they cannot claim anything more in the hereafter. As has already been pointed out by Deissmann,<sup>2</sup> in the immediately preceding v. 1 the author speaks of μισθὸν ἔχειν without the ἀπο-prefix, so there must be a difference. The difference is that ἀπέχειν is a technical term for getting a receipt by which debts are settled. So ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν means that they have received their due reward. Now these are very well-known instances of this usage, but it is much less well-known that other compounds with ἀπο- can have the same force.<sup>3</sup>

I will demonstrate this with the verb ἀπάγω. It usually means 'lead away' or 'carry off'. But it can also have the semantic aspect of 'bringing back', 'bringing home', 'returning', 'rendering what one owes', as a quick glance in LSJ shows.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in Xenophon *Anabasis* I.3.14, the soldiers say that they are going to choose other leaders as soon as possible if Clearchus is not willing to *bring them back home* (ἀπάγειν). Or Plato *Phaedo* 58b, where in the opening scene of the dialogue the speaker recounts: 'The Athenians say that this is the ship in which Theseus once sailed to Crete with the seven youths and seven maidens, and saved their lives and his own as well. The story goes that the Athenians made a vow to Apollo that if these young people's lives were saved, they would send (ἀπάξειν) a solemn mission every year to Delos, and ever since then they have kept their vow to the god, even down to the present day.' This is a very good illustrative example since it is the element of the vow to Apollo that makes it abundantly clear that sending a yearly mission to his sacred island was something due to be done; it was a moral obligation. Hence ἀπάγειν and not just ἄγειν or πέμπειν or the like is used here. Many more examples could be given, but a few more instances of the verb used by Luke (ἀποφέρειν) will suffice.

In Herodotus and Thucydides one finds ἀποφέρειν repeatedly used for paying taxes due to the government or for paying amounts of money that had been stipulated in a treaty (e.g. Herodotus *Hist.* I.196.3; IV.35.1; V.84.1; Thucydides *Hist.* V.31). In such cases the verb undoubtedly means 'bringing [the money] to the persons entitled to it or to the bodies where it belongs'.<sup>5</sup> The element of belonging is also apparent in those cases in which ἀποφέρεσθαι is used for going back home or being brought home, as in Lysias *Or.* 12.18, where it is said that a man who had died in prison was brought back home (τεθνεῶς ἐκ δεσμοτηρίου ἀπεφέρετο).

2 A. Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1923), 88–90.

3 Even the new BDAG often does not record this semantic aspect. See for some other instances J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929 [repr. 1963]), II, 298.

4 *S.v.* II and III.

5 The lexicon of LSJ *s.v.* II 4 also lists as a meaning 'to hand over as required'.

And in *Leges* 910c, Plato says that worship may take place only in public temples; it is forbidden to have private shrines. If someone is found to possess such a private shrine, the governors should order it to be ‘transferred’ (*ἀποφέρειν*) to a public temple. It is clear why the verb *ἀποφέρειν* is used for ‘transferring’: the public temple is the only place where worship is due.

More instances could be quoted, but these few illustrative examples make sufficiently clear that in the case of Luke’s use of *ἀπενεχθῆναι* in 16.22 we have to take into serious consideration that he wanted to convey the sense of Abraham’s bosom as the place where the poor Lazarus belonged and that he was entitled to.<sup>6</sup> This interpretation fits in excellently with Luke’s own version of the first beatitude in Luke 6.20: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’.<sup>7</sup>

6 The fact that in other places in the NT *ἀποφέρειν* usually has the meaning of ‘carrying off, taking away’ does not at all militate against this conclusion.

7 I owe thanks to my colleagues Professors Tjitze Baarda and Maarten Menken for some critical remarks on the first version of this short note and to my friend Dr James Pankhurst for the correction of my English.