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# A Yawning Chasm

by Eric F. F. Bishop

*For some years back we have celebrated the New Year with one of Mr. Bishop's short biblical studies against the Palestinian landscape. In 1973 we are glad to start with yet another of these.*

WHEN Abraham and Dives carried on their conversation as recorded in the Gospel of St. Luke (16:19-31), they are portrayed as imagining themselves back in Palestine, or at least availing themselves of some of its familiar features. The latter had been able to see Lazarus "far away" close by the Patriarch; while their respective voices "carried" recognizably across the separating barrier. May there not be some indication here that despite the interpretative difficulties of this chapter it is in part one of the Palestinian stories of the Master? Only a few verses before the Evangelist recorded that Jesus told how the father spotted the returning prodigal, when he was still a long distance off.<sup>1</sup> Then, so far as voices "carrying" in the clear atmosphere, we have the narrative in the Book of Samuel of how David and Abishai upbraided Abner for not looking properly after the Lord's Anointed, while the former later had a conversation across the valley with Saul who at once recognized the voice of David.<sup>2</sup> Are not these phenomena characteristic of Palestine "throughout all generations"?

May not "Palestine" too be of some help in getting at the background picture of the familiar rendering of the A.V., "a great gulf fixed"? Whatever Aramaic word our Lord employed for that translated χάσμα, the phrase has become proverbial and we know what it means; but just how did it come to mean it? If the metaphor is obvious, what is the imagery behind? Both the R.S.V. and the N.E.B. have done the correct thing in taking the line of least resistance and transliterate St. Luke's χάσμα with "chasm".<sup>3</sup> The word only occurs here in the N.T.<sup>4</sup> Among the Commentaries that of A. B. Bruce in the *Expositor's Greek Testament* is illuminating: "a cleft or ravine . . . vast in breadth, depth and length; an effectual barrier to intercommunication"<sup>5</sup>—other than the pair of phenomena already mentioned. Perhaps the best explanation of χάσμα, provided the conception is Palestinian, would be "wadi". George Adam

<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:20.

<sup>2</sup> I Samuel 26:13ff.

<sup>3</sup> Goodspeed also transliterates.

<sup>4</sup> The Plural occurs in Plato. See Creed's Commentary *ad loc.*

<sup>5</sup> A. B. Bruce, *Expositor's Greek Testament* i. 589.

Smith lists some 400 "wadis" in the country great and small, dry in summer, torrent-like in winter, but there all the time.<sup>6</sup> If the O.T. has made us familiar with the "Brook Cherith"—the *Wādi Kelt*—the N.T. has made us even more familiar with the "Brook Kedron" (R.S.V. "valley; N.E.B. "ravine").<sup>7</sup> The *wādīs* are there first, before the places often called after them, as in the exciting rediscovery of Qumrān above the *wādi* of that name, where the rather sheer drop from the location of the Settlement is several hundred feet.<sup>8</sup>

The Palestinian *wādi* has embedded itself not only in the geography of the country but in its thought-life and vocabulary. May it not be something in the nature of the *wādi* used metaphorically, which our Lord put into the mouth of Abraham, an idea readily understood by Dives—not a "gulf" as such,<sup>9</sup> much less one "fixed" unless St. Luke's ἐσθήρικται implies some idea of the irrevocable? In this connection it is worth noting that in the early Arabic printed versions of the N.T. (Roman and Reformed) this perfect tense is omitted and the consequent statement is simpler: "Between us and you there is a great ravine"<sup>10</sup>—after all there is no need to say that a *wādi* is "fixed"; of course it is, unless filled up by an earthquake, which would create a few more. These ravines or gorges are an integral part of the country. *Wādi* has three classical plurals and one in common parlance. Like much else the word is used in proverbs; and one proverb is curiously parallel to Abraham's remark. When there exists a definite difference of opinion or purpose or experience between two groups or individuals, one is likely to remark "You are in one *wādi* and we are in another *wādi*". It has certainly, in Palestine and Syria, countless times been employed these past decades, mostly over the same problem of the flouting of divine justice, over which Abraham had to remind Dives. That is the one principle that for monotheistic faiths is ultimately irrevocable in the long term. "God does justice at whatever cost". After all too a gulf is much more fluid and less permanent than a *wādi*, which can never be subject to ocean tides. *Bab el-Wad*, the Gate of the Valley,

<sup>6</sup> *Historical Atlas of the Holy Land: General Index* 10, 11.

<sup>7</sup> In John 18:1 Arabic versions read *wādi* for χειμαρρος (another N.T. *hapax legomenon*). It was/is a torrent in winter time but dry in the rainy season.

<sup>8</sup> There are very good views in Matthew Black's *The Scrolls and Christian Origins*, following page 30.

<sup>9</sup> The ordinary Arabic for "gulf" does not seem to have any metaphorical usage.

<sup>10</sup> The versions of 1591 and 1616.

<sup>11</sup> Another proverb says that words that sound the same but may have different meanings are in "one *wādi*".

at the bottom of the Descent from Jerusalem, whatever the change in name, remains the same.

In most Arabic versions χάσμα is rendered *huwwah*, which implies depth rather than width, an abyss, being connected with the root meaning (*inter alia*) "to fall".<sup>12</sup> Might it be that the possible Palestinian interpretation of the phrase could be the correct introduction to the rest of the conversation? Did the barrier between the Land of Abraham and the world that Dives had left and where his brethren still resided also consist of a *wadi*—"a yawning chasm"? If that was the case, the way across was via Moses and the Prophets. The denizens of his "father's house" might well use them like a bridge; which has a kind of parallel in the *sirāt-al-mustaqīm* along which the Muslim craves daily to be guided.<sup>13</sup> The continuance of the conversation on the part of the Rich Man is understood negatively in the older Arabic texts: "Unless one goes to them from the dead, they will *not* repent".<sup>14</sup> This seems to make the rejoinder of Abraham clearer and more graphic. They have a *wadi* which leads to life—Moses and the Prophets would have been enough for them—till one did come back from the dead, and revealed Himself for good and all as the True and Living *Wadi* ever leading anyone who wants to go that way, up and on.

*Redhill, Surrey.*

<sup>12</sup> The word for "hell" in the Creed is from the same root—*hawiyat*—which occurs only once in the Qur'an.

<sup>13</sup> This *sirat* according to Palestinian folklore is reckoned as stretching across the Kedron (Hinnom) from Olivet to the Golden Gate in the City—for the Last Judgment.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Jesus of Palestine*.