

Matthew S. Rindge, *Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13-34 among Ancient Conversations on Death and Possessions* (Society of Biblical Literature. Early Christianity and Its Literature 6; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). Pp. xix + 299. USD 36.95. ISBN 978-15-898-361-43

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In 2008 Matthew S. Rindge, then already Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University (Spokane, WA), defended his doctoral dissertation at Emory University (Atlanta, Ga, US), under the supervision of Gail O'Day. That work was entitled: "Illustrating Wisdom: Luke 12:16-21 and the Interplay of Death and Possessions in Sapiential Literature". The book reviewed here, a revision of that doctoral thesis, is devoted to "one of the most neglected parables in the Synoptic Gospels" – Luke 12:16-21. It is quite well known that this passage is omitted not only from some modern general studies on the parables (A. Balmain Bruce, C.H. Dodd; D.O. Via Jr., E. Linneman, P. Perkins, R.W. Funk) but also from works concerned specifically with the lukan parables (K. Bailey). The reason for such neglect probably lies in the story's seemingly simple, self-evident message, however, Rindge perceives the essence of the parable quite differently.

Noting its immediate context – a short dialogue regarding an inheritance (12:13-15) and a discourse on anxiety, God, and possessions (12:22-34) – the author lists some rudimentary elements of the parable: the unusually fruitful crop, the dilemma of the owner, and the owner's solution. The quandary of the story's main figure, expressed in the simple and short question "What shall I do?", appears many times in the Lukan work, but such an internal debate is also well known in Hebrew Bible texts. Rindge is convinced that Qoh 8:15, Sir 11:14-19 and 1 En. 97:8-10 all are proper thematic contexts for the parable. In his opinion, one feature unique to the chosen pericope makes it special within the larger synoptic tradition: God himself speaks in the scene (Luke 12:20), labeling the man a fool (epithet), revealing his near future (statement), and asking about the future of his goods (question). The parable concludes with a short theological comment.

Having laid this groundwork, the author poses some general questions about the text, thus framing the study to follow. Some are asked from a narrative perspective, the first two dealing with the narrative roles of the man and his land, and the other two connected with the active role of God. Other questions are more literary and exegetical in nature, for example how we should understand the writer's inserting God as direct participant in the story, the meaning of the man's foolishness, the question of who it is that will demand the man's soul, etc. Still other queries focus on the relationship between the parable proper (Luke 12:16-20), its immediate literary frame (12:13-15, 21), and its broader Lukan context (12:13-34). The final set of questions are posed from an intertextual perspective as Rindge explores some elements connecting the version of the text found in Luke and its counterpart in the Gospel of Thomas. Also, he examines in particular the two themes of death and possessions, inquiring into possible relationships between Luke's parable and the sapiential texts mentioned above.

The first chapter of Rindge's study is devoted to the panorama of interpretations of Luke 12:16-21 over the course of history (ch. one – pp. 9-44). He not only summarizes various propositions spanning early Medieval times to the modern period, but he also reviews some solutions advanced by specific scholars (Jülicher, Eichholz, Seng, Scott). He concludes that the traditional reading of this parable as an uncomplicated "example story" warning against the dangers of avarice can no longer be embraced. Since the author is convinced that the parable he decided to study is sapiential in nature rather than prophetic, he regards it necessary to provide the reader with a broader sapiential context.

Rindge recognizes, of course, that his agenda is neither new nor original, but he insists on presenting the sapiential material in its own setting, apart from former preconceptions about the parables and their potential meaning or purpose. He rightly points out that Jewish wisdom literature encompasses many conflicting voices, thus it is necessary to avoid reductionist analyses by taking this diversity into consideration, and by reading such texts on their own terms. The Second Temple literature on death and possessions is represented by Qoheleth, Ben Sira (ch. two – pp. 43-86), 1 Enoch, and the Testament of Abraham (ch. three – pp. 87-122). Texts of Lucian and Seneca are chosen as comparative material from among Hellenistic and Roman writings (ch. four – pp. 123-122).

In Qoheleth, death and possessions are, according to the author, virtually inseparable. Since one is unable to control death, Ecclesiastes proposes finding the meaning of one's existence in a proper control over daily life, with a strong accent on the enjoyment of goods received from God. In the

case of Ben Sira, one can likewise see the inevitability of death (8:7) and the value of wealth. However, Ben Sira accentuates more the need for sharing one's goods with generosity.

On the other hand, the Epistle of 1 Enoch is viewed by the author as "antithetical to several of the core tenets of Qoheleth" (p. 100). 1 Enoch's author differentiates between the future of the righteous and that of the wicked, expressing a belief in life after death. He is also convinced that the fact of unavoidable death should *not* be regarded as consent for enjoyment. Unfortunately, he gives no hint as to how possessions should be correctly used.

The Testament of Abraham discusses the issue of death as well. It considers the end of human life as inescapable, yet possessions do not lose their utility or meaning, showing their value mainly through hospitality and in a right choice of one's heir.

In Rindge's opinion, the motif of "control" is central to the Jewish understanding of death and also to characteristic Jewish approaches toward possessions. Since death represents the ultimate loss of control, each author proposes his own way of controlling possessions before the end of life. According to the American exegete, both Ben Sira and the Testament of Abraham "establish a causal relationship between a person's use of possessions and one's subsequent treatment in death" (p. 120).

There are many Greco-Roman texts on death and possessions, but they are hardly connected to each other, and most take the form of moral discourse. Rindge has chosen *Dialogues of the Dead* written by Lucian of Samosata and Seneca's *Epistulae morales*. His choice, however, lacks clear criteria. According to the author it is sufficient that these texts "exhibit perspectives on death and possessions that are significant in light of attitudes toward these two motifs in the four Hellenistic Jewish texts previously surveyed as well as Luke's parable of the Rich Fool" (p. 124). He also presents two other reasons for studying Lucian and Seneca: first, consideration of the cross-cultural nature of the complex conversation on death and possessions and, secondly, the potential influence of Greco-Roman culture on the setting in which Luke-Acts was composed.

Greco-Roman literature has some particular proposals for dealing with the threat of death, some of which indeed have to do with possessions. In the writings of Lucian and Seneca, death is often pictured as an opportunity to reconsider one's understanding of how he/she possesses, uses and evaluates material goods. Thus, death becomes a kind of legitimization for meaningful living.

In chapter five (pp. 166-194) Rindge draws a broader context for the parable, along with its sapiential elements and its interplay with Qoheleth

and Ben Sira. While he does not argue that Luke was familiar with every specific text under consideration, Rindge does insist that the evangelist was at least familiar with the kinds of discussions that brought these texts into being (p. 161).

Drawing on the lukan context, he also identifies six realms of human activity which might constitute meaningful uses of possessions in light of one's imminent death: enjoyment, inheritance, generosity, giving to God, hospitality, and alms. He comes to the conclusion that the main character in Luke 12:16-21 practiced none of these legitimate expressions, with the exception of the first – enjoyment. Thus he manages to characterize the owner's folly in terms of his somewhat "limited imagination" (p. 194). He is convinced that such a conclusion is reached more easily if one looks for a sapiential background to the parable rather than a prophetic one.

Further assessment of the owner's attitude is offered in chapter six. There Rindge analyses other parables from the immediate literary context which concern greed (Luke 12:13-21), alms (12:20, 21b, 22-34), and the foolishness of saving for the future while ignoring the imminence of death (pp. 195-216). In his opinion, Luke rejects certain specific uses of possessions as meaningless, since death is unavoidable and its time is uncertain. He also discards both greed and the practice of inheritance (Luke 12:15), but he does so in order to express his own theological, existential, and ethical concerns. These are well presented in ch. seven (pp. 217-230) where Rindge discusses Luke 12:13-34, asking questions about the use of stockpiled resources and their proper role in human life. For Luke, among the voices of Second Temple literature, alms and a proper command of one's wealth turn out to be the constructive alternatives.

The last stage of Rindge's study is a comparison of two versions of the parable (Luke versus Thomas) which, according to the author, helps in identifying the distinctive features of Luke's story (pp. 231-237). In his opinion, Luke's parable is constructed in such a way that it helps the reader identify personally with the main character. In pointing out the many differences between these two texts, the American scholar takes special note, in the Gospel of Luke, of God's interest in man's plan for his possessions, which makes evident the owner's greed (p. 237).

Closing the dissertation are some final conclusions on the function and meaning of the parable of the Rich Fool (pp. 239-248). The author is convinced that Luke 12:13-34 re-configures some older sapiential motifs, ones which highlight the appropriate aspects of material gain and the use of these resources on behalf of others rather than merely for one's own future security and enjoyment. Alms turn out to be the antidote both to greed and to fear for the future. It is also the chief avenue for becoming "rich toward God".

Besides Luke 12,13-34, many other lukan parables explore the subject of death and possessions (10:30-36; 15:11-32; 16:1-8, 19-31). These are concerned with ways of experiencing meaningful life, since Luke, as a theologian, always relates his parables to human existential enterprise. After P. Ricoeur, Rindge defines the parables as “narratives of disorientation and reorientation” (p. 242), because Luke deconstructs certain behaviors and also constructs worlds of new possibilities for living. His language is in many ways sapiential, thus it is worth reading the parables as sapiential narratives.

Originally Rindge's dissertation contained one additional chapter, which concerned the Egyptian literature on death and possessions. The author does not explain why he decided to omit it from the published book version, excusing himself by saying that he will occasionally make use of the material whenever he thinks it relevant to his analysis of texts. Rindge's book is well provided with an extensive bibliography on the subject and also with two indexes, of ancient sources and of modern authors.

The dissertation of the American scholar from Spokane is no doubt a valuable and enriching study. However, the content of his book poses some problems. First of all, Rindge has staked out such a broad textual background for his parable that one must ask two opposing questions: Why so much? and Why only this? In other words, his choices call for much clearer criteria, which are lacking. Second, the sapiential nature of Luke's parable is a useful interpretive frame, but is this the only possible milieu for engaging the story of the Rich Fool? Are Qohelet and Ben Sira the only biblical or peri-biblical context one might take into consideration? The same issue applies to the Hellenistic literature (Cynic resources). Third, does the fact that the parable's context is more sapiential than prophetic exclude the latter entirely? And, if so, why has Christian tradition overlooked the sapiential connection for so long? Fourth, are the texts Rindge has chosen for the background of Luke 12:13-34 really of the same nature? That is, is it justifiable comparing such different approaches toward death and possessions drawn from historically diverse times? Is their interplay really so obvious? Fifth, the author takes it for granted that the texts he decided to analyze were in fact familiar to Luke (or to Jesus), but it would profit the reader to find some argument for this, with some comparisons made to Jewish literature.

Taken as a whole, the book of Matthew S. Rindge is a good example of rigorous, well-reasoned biblical work, giving the reader many occasions not only to better understand the Parable of Rich Fool itself, but to grasp its broad sapiential context as well. It is obligatory reading for all those who are interested in Luke's theology and its literary sources of inspiration.