This book represents the author’s doctoral dissertation. Noting that most studies on wealth and possessions in Luke’s Gospel use approaches that are broadly within the historical-critical approach, while a few take a literary-critical approach, Metzger opts for an analysis that relies principally upon reader-response criticism. He also employs narratological and narrative-critical tools and intertextuality. According to Metzger, while almost every chapter of Luke’s Gospel addresses issues of wealth and possessions, this study considers only four parables, which are set within Luke’s “travel narrative”: Luke 12:13–21; 15:11–32; 16:1–13; and 16:19–31. These four parables share wealthy men as characters, “settings (residences of the elite), and a common motif (overconsumption)” (13). Metzger follows the analysis of these four parables with a chapter on the ruler in Luke 18 and Zacchaeus in Luke 19 to determine if the result of studying the parables provides a perspective that is consistent with the overall perspective on wealth and possessions of the travel narrative.

The opening chapter, like most dissertations, contains a Forschungsbericht in which Metzger summarizes the diversity of views over the treatment of wealth and possessions in Luke’s Gospel. The differences of interpretation arise from the fact that Jesus in Luke requires different responses to wealth and possessions among the people with whom he
interacts. The ruler in Luke 18 is commanded to sell all that he has and to give it to the poor, while Zacchaeus is not commanded to give away everything. Metzger describes the scholarly opinions on this diversity within Luke’s Gospel. Some see the command to the rich to give away everything as normative for Luke’s audience, while others see the emphasis being upon almsgiving for Luke’s audience.

The larger, subsequent section of chapter 1 focuses on issues of method. Metzger describes his approach to “reading” Jesus’ parabolic discourse in Luke, the way “Jesus’ inaugural discourse in Nazareth will function programmatically for a reading of the four parables” (15), Metzger’s reader-oriented approach, and the way that narrative-critical, narratological, and intertextual tools will be employed. Metzger considers Jesus’ parable of the Sower and asserts that, like the disciples and “others,” readers are on their own to interpret most of the Lukan parables. Readers should consult the text and narrator for guidance in interpretation, but this guidance should not be allowed to overcome the reader’s interpretations; it will be “heard and engaged” (25).

Metzger offers a brief discussion of reader-response criticism and its application to his study. It may be asked whether such a brief treatment will enable those unfamiliar with this approach to understand how it will function in the study. Borrowing some elements from Fish and Iser, and adopting the narratology of Mieke Bal, he concludes a brief treatment of narrative criticism by stating that this study will approach Luke’s Gospel as an “open, often ambiguous text replete with fractures and inconsistencies will be foregrounded and all narrative elements and features will be viewed as constructs imposed from without” (51). In terms of intertextuality, Metzger will limit intertexts to voices (not only literary) of the first-century Mediterranean world. Stress is laid upon the reading of this study being done by a flesh-and-blood reader, and Metzger describes his social location, which includes concern with overconsumption in the United States. The last several pages of chapter 1 delineate the features of this overconsumption.

Chapter 2 is tied to this discussion by its thematic title, “Challenging Consumption.” It deals with the “parable of the Wealthy Landlord” in Luke 12 and the “parable of the Father with Two Sons” in Luke 15. Metzger first summarizes Jesus’ teaching about wealth and possessions prior to the first of these two parables, then asks, in light of that teaching, what Jesus’ audience likely thought when they heard him begin the parable, “a certain rich man.” Then Metzger analyzes Jesus’ encounter with a man who wants Jesus’ help with the man’s inheritance. That leads to a discussion of contemporary views of pleonoxia. Metzger steps through the parable, asking at each point what Jesus’ audience would have thought as they heard each phrase, but offering no answers. Metzger argues, however, that, while the landowner’s plan to tear down his old barns and build new, bigger barns although the harvest is ready now (12:18) is odd, it is not clear at that point
that he should be seen as especially bad, even if his proposal may “foreshadow some sort of negative evaluation” (74). Metzger argues that the parable requires an ellipsis of many months between the rich farmer’s decision and God’s pronouncement (12:20). Metzger concludes that the parable itself would not clearly indicate how the audience ought to view the rich farmer. It is only the context, 12:15, and 12:21, and contrary to God’s statement in 12:20, that points to the rich farmer being selfish and overly self-indulgent.

As readers encounter the younger son in the parable of the Father with Two Sons, they will be led to expect, both because of the previous two parables in which the lost is found and because of the “mytheme” of two sons, to see the elder son as boorish and the younger son as roguish, but they know that in the end all will turn out well. A first-century audience, in light of Jesus’ teaching about wealth, might consider the father as evil for squandering wealth to throw an extravagant party, but in the end of the parable both the younger son and father are seen in a positive light. The elder brother is needed at the end of the parable to critique overconsumption and wealth. In the course of his analysis of these two parables, Metzger raises many questions, such as: What sin did the younger son repent of? How much time elapsed between the rich farmer speaking to himself about building bigger barns and God telling him he would die that night? One wonders whether first-century or twenty-first-century hearers of these parables would stop to ask such questions of such brief stories, rather than taking them as they are, with their cultural aspects.

In chapter 3 Metzger looks at two parables that criticize wealth as such, and not merely overconsumption. Jesus’ comments on the parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13) indicate, for the first time in Luke’s Gospel, that wealth itself is evil. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus emphasizes this as well. Given that Abraham’s statement to the rich man that explains the latter’s destiny focuses only on the fact that the rich man had “good things” in his earthly life, Jesus is condemning having wealth. It is not enough to give alms or show hospitality, “acts that offer temporary relief without the lasting structural changes that would most benefit the poor”; Abraham condemns wealth regardless of how it was acquired or maintained (150).

Chapter 4 examines Jesus’ teaching on wealth and possession in the remainder of the travel narrative, particularly in the story of the ruler in Luke 19:19–23 and Zacchaeus in 19:1–10. After suggesting reasons the audience might initially view the ruler in either a positive or negative light, Metzger notes the way that Jesus seeks to dismiss the ruler hastily, having rejected him “out of hand” (62). Is it really the case, however, that Jesus’ answer that the man should do the commandments is given in haste because Jesus is irritated with the ruler? The fact that Jesus has just welcomed all children to himself does not imply a contrast, and Jesus’ words could be construed in other ways than impatience.
Implied in both of these stories is overconsumption and the need to divest oneself of riches in order to get rid of the means of overconsumption. Furthermore, by Zacchaeus’s announcement that he is going to divest himself of his wealth and give it to the poor, “he furthers Jesus’ mission for a more equitable distribution of resources while passing through the needle’s eye into God’s kingdom” (181). The fifth and final chapter ends with a “Rejoinder” in which Metzger describes the ways in which capitalism promotes overconsumption and the similarities between Roman Palestine and the United States in the twenty-first century, in that a few hold most of the wealth; Metzger then suggests in general how Luke’s Gospel critiques both.

Metzger raises many interesting questions in his reader-oriented approach to these four parables and suggests many interpretive possibilities. These are interesting but simultaneously problematic. There are a number of reader-oriented approaches, and Metzger’s is on the more subjective end of the spectrum. Given his perspective that Luke’s Gospel is inconsistent and unstable in what the narrative teaches, we need to ask whether Metzger’s suggestions and interpretations offer any assistance in a public reading of Luke’s Gospel. That is, what are we to take away from this book besides some interesting personal musings by a scholar? Metzger does not ground his suggestions for how the parables might be read/heard in the rhetorical and auditory context of his reconstructed first-century audience, but stresses ambiguity in the meaning of the parables, and this seems unhelpful to Metzger’s readers in understanding Luke or these four parables. As Metzger himself states, his reading will “remain but one conceivable performance alongside an infinite number of possibilities—fragile and deconstructible, hovering perilously above a ‘seething flux’ of alternative hermeneutical choices” (184). Metzger’s reading will, however, appeal to other readers who are concerned about overconsumption in the United States and who wish to enlist the Gospel of Luke “as a conversation partner with the hope that it would prove to be an insightful and challenging interlocutor, perhaps offering a vision for society that is more just and humane” (184).