This monograph is a revision of the doctoral dissertation of Matthew S. Rindge (currently Gonzaga University), “Illustrating Wisdom: Luke 12:16–21 and the Interplay of Death and Possessions in Sapiential Literature,” which was completed in 2008 under the direction of Gail O’Day (Wake Forest University School of Divinity). In this fine treatment of the parable of the Rich Fool, Rindge contextualizes the tale through a literary analysis of the interplay of death and possessions in Jewish (Qoheleth, Ben Sira, the Epistle of 1 Enoch, and the Testament of Abraham) and Greco-Roman (Lucian’s Dialogues of the Dead and Seneca’s Moral Epistles) literature and examines how the parable appropriates and reconfigures this (largely) sapiential conversation.

In the introduction Rindge laments the lack of scholarly interest in the story over the past century of modern parable research. The vast majority of parable scholars have assumed that it is a simple tale of greed and presents few interpretive complexities. In response, Rindge offers two helpful observations to nuance this thoroughly entrenched reading of the parable. First, this is the only member of the ἄνθροπος τις (“a certain person”) and ἄνθρωπος τις πλούσιος (“a certain rich man”) literary families unique to Luke whose subject of the opening line is not a person—it is the χώρα (“land”). Second, it is the only Synoptic parable that features God as a character who speaks and affects the trajectory of
the plot. These two distinctive features raise a series of new types of questions that have largely gone unaddressed.

Throughout the interpretive history of this text, premodern and modern readings have maintained an a priori assumption that it functions “prophetically”; that is, the plot unfolds merely to illustrate the avarice and self-indulgence of the landowner, rather than as a reflection on the proper use of possessions in the light of the inevitability of death. This approach eliminates the interpretive necessity of looking beyond the boundaries of these six verses, which Rindge argues is necessary to produce a richer, more dialogical reading of the parable. Some modern scholars have compared and contrasted the Lukan parable with Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, including wisdom traditions, but their preoccupation with possessions and wealth blind them to the existential problem that is germane to the passage.

Rindge proceeds with a close reading of four Hellenistic Jewish texts that represent diverse perspectives on the twinned motif of death and possessions. He begins with Qoheleth, which identifies possessions as divine gifts and recommends the enjoyment of these gifts as a means of control given the fragility of all things. Although not as central to the book as a whole, Ben Sira also insists on the inevitability of death, but Ben Sira approaches possessions with a certain degree of ambiguity. Possessions can be good for all, but only if they are used for the benefit of all through timely acts of generosity. While Ben Sira infers that death functions as a kind of judgment, postmortem divine judgment is the rhetorical foundation of the Epistle of 1 Enoch (1 En. 92–105) and the enjoyment of possessions the preeminent criterion of judgment for the wicked dead. The Epistle does not describe how possessions might be used positively, but the Testament of Abraham, which is closest in form to the Lukan parable, does view the use of one’s goods in acts of hospitality as potentially meaningful.

This Second Temple conversation is further nuanced by the inclusion of two texts in Greco-Roman moral discourse that also treat this twinned motif. In the satirical play Dialogues of the Dead, Lucian agrees with Qoheleth that possessions are useless after death but heavily criticizes avarice from an eschatological perspective. In addition, they also agree that a will or testament is meaningless, but while Qoheleth does not believe one can control who will receive one’s goods, Lucian is convinced that one cannot control how one’s goods will be used. Seneca also emphasizes the inevitability of death in his Epistles in so far as it serves as a reminder of the importance of how well one lives. For Seneca, the accumulation of possessions and the concomitant luxurious lifestyle is simply a manifestation of the fear of death; in his view, these persons are already dead because they have adopted a meaningless posture to the problem of death.
The disparate perspectives of these select Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman texts on the proper use of possessions are directly shaped by a particular view of death. This is also the operative framework of the broader literary context of the parable of the Rich Fool—death and anxiety permeate Luke 12:4–34. In addition, the term παραβολή (“parable”; 12:16a), the internal dialogue of the man (12:17–19), and the epithet ἄφρων (“fool”; 12:20a) are common sapiential characteristics. Given these points of contact, Rindge compares the landowner’s use of his goods with the six possibilities identified in the Second Temple conversation: enjoyment, inheritance, generosity, giving to God, hospitality, and alms. The “fool” fails on all counts; he only plans to enjoy his possessions despite the uncertainty of the future and the inevitability of his own death.

The folly of the rich man extends beyond his failure to enact any of these sapiential recommendations. The twin motifs of inheritance (12:13) and greed (12:15) preface the parable, which both figure prominently in the sapiential discourse, but it is the admonition to be rich toward God in 12:21 that functions as the primary literary and theological interpretive lens for the parable—hence, the unique presence of God as a speaking character to pronounce judgment upon the “fool” in the latter part of the story. The rich man, despite the ethical opportunity that the justly acquired surplus of his land availed, failed to respond imaginatively to the existential angst engendered by the certainty of his own death and place his trust in a beneficent God through the giving of alms—the only form of divine wealth—the one corrective to avarice the Evangelist identifies in 12:33.

Rindge also addresses the divine judgment of the man as a “fool,” which is often treated as the crux interpretum of the parable. The epithet is typically read in the light of Ps 14:1a, suggesting he is kind of atheist, but if the only other occurrence of ἄφρων in Luke-Acts (Luke 11:40) is considered alongside the sapiential literary landscape, a very different conclusion emerges. The man is a “fool” because he failed to accept his own mortality and, as a result, failed to properly use his possessions for the benefit of his own life and others. Finally, Rindge concludes his study with a comparison of the Greek and Coptic versions of the tale (Gos. Thom. 63). These two stories diverge on many points, but it is the absence of God and the admonition to be rich toward God in the Coptic version that is most striking. Clearly, the Lukan parable insists that the behavior of the “fool” is both a theological and ethical (mis)action.

The expansion of the comparative net that Rindge champions is to be commended, and his treatment of the primary literature is superb. Some will be disappointed that he focuses exclusively on the final form of the Lukan parable and neglects a diachronic analysis, especially given the variant version in the Gospel of Thomas, but the seemingly narrow focus of his argument permits a close reading of the relevant traditions (both Jewish and
Greco-Roman) that is too often eschewed in modern parable research. The argument is convincing but could have been buttressed by an exploration of the possibility of a second-century dating of Luke-Acts, rendering “Luke” and Lucian contemporaries. More importantly, however, is the absence of a formal discussion of the ways in which the parable interacts with the Lukan literary corpus beyond the boundaries of Luke 12:3–34 (and 11:40)—certainly within the purview of a synchronic analysis. For example, it would have only enriched his argument to consider the interpretive implications of a comparative reading of the story of a rich man who fails to give alms and whose life is unexpectedly taken and the story of a rich man who fails to give alms, unexpectedly dies, and is tormented in Hades. In fairness, Rindge does examine the broader Lukan perspective on enjoyment, inheritance, generosity, giving to God, hospitality, and alms, but it is cursory at best. These minor suggestions aside, this monograph stands as a welcome invitation to recapture the wisdom of a tale of how one might live meaningfully in an uncertain world.