FORMAL INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY
Genesis 11:1-9: The Tower of Babel

by
Sue Didaskalos

RS 100-G: The Bible in the Modern World
Professor H. Moreh
August 24, 2004

Table of Contents

I. Introduction .................................................. 1
II. Finding the Unit .............................................. 1
III. Outline ...................................................... 1
IV. Researching the Words ..................................... 3
V. Relating the Parts ........................................... 4
VI. Summary Statement ......................................... 6
VII. Apply to Life ............................................... 6
VIII. Bibliography ............................................... 8
Introduction

The story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) has fascinated inquisitive minds for thousands of years. It elicits an image of an awesome pyramid-like structure ascending into the stratosphere with people climbing to its upper reaches in hopes of seeing the gods. Why was this story included in the Bible? Does it have any significance for us today? In response to these questions, this paper will present a step-by-step analysis of the Babel story and, in the process, uncover some of its hidden secrets. The primary Bible version I used was the NIV.

Find the Unit

The story of Babel extends from Genesis 11:1 to 11:9. The story is framed by a reference to “language” in 11:1 and 11:9, and by a reference to “spreading” or “scattering” the people in 10:32b and 11:9. The story is sharply distinguished from the preceding unit by a change of setting; the Babel story takes place on the plains of Shinar (11:2), whereas the previous text concerns various regions around the world (10:5, 10, 19, 30). The Babel story is distinguished from both the preceding unit (10:1-32) and the following unit (11:10-26) by its style; the Babel incident is a narrative, whereas the preceding and following units are genealogies.

The Babel story is unified primarily by the fact that it tells a complete story about a tower and its builders. In addition, there is some distinctive vocabulary; the words “scattered” (11:4, 8, 9), “language” (11:1, 6, 7, 9), and “come let us” (11:3, 4, 7) permeate the Babel story but do not occur in either the preceding or the following passage.

Outline

The story of the Tower of Babel has two major sections. The first section highlights human action (11:2-4) and the second focuses on the divine response (11:5-8). These two sections are framed by an introductory statement (11:1) and a concluding explanation (11:9).

I. Introduction (11:1)
A. Temporal indicator: Now (1a)
B. Description: the whole world had one language and a common speech (1b)

II. Act One: Human Action (11:2-4)
A. Geographic indicator: As they moved eastward, (2a)
B. Description of human action (2b)
1. Action 1: they found a plain in Shinar and
2. Action 2: settled there.
C. First proposal (3)
1. Narrative report: They said to each other, (3a)
2. Quoted speech (3b)
   a. Deliberation 1: “Come, let’s”
   b. Proposed actions
      (1) “make bricks and”
      (2) “take them thoroughly.”
3. Narrative report of actions (3c)
   a. Action 1: They used brick instead of stone and
   b. Action 2: tar for mortar.

D. Second proposal (4)
1. Narrative report: Then they said, (4a)
2. Quoted speech (3b)
   a. Deliberation 2: “Come, let us” (4b)
   b. Proposed actions
      (1) “build ourselves a city”
      (2) “with a tower with its top in the heavens”
3. Reasons (4c)
   a. Purpose 1: “so that we may make a name for ourselves”
   b. Purpose 2: “and not be scattered over the whole earth.”

III. Act Two: YHWH’s Action in Response (11:5-8)
A. Contrast: But (5a)
B. Description of YHWH’s action (5b)
   1. Action: the LORD came down
   2. Purpose: to see the city and the tower that they were building,
C. Proposal (6-7)
   1. Narrative report: The LORD said, (6a)
   2. Quoted speech (6b-7)
      a. Conditional statement (6b-c)
         (1) “If” clause: “If as one people speaking the same language... to do this,”
         (2) “Then” clause: “then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”
      b. Statement of intention
         (1) Deliberation: “Come, let us” (7)
         (2) Proposed actions
            (a) “go down and”
            (b) “confuse their language”
   (3) Reason: “so they will not understand each other,”
D. Action: So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth (8a)
E. Result: and they stopped building the city. (8b)

IV. Conclusion (11:9)
A. Explanation: That is why it was called Babel (9a)
B. Reason: because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. (9b)
C. Epilogue: From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (9c)
Researching the Words

Three words or groups of words seem to be most significant. The word language, from the Hebrew noun šāpi, appears four times in this unit (11:1, 6, 7, 9). Šāpi can mean “lip,” “language,” or “edge.” “Language” appears to be the intended meaning in Genesis 11 because the other two do not fit the context (Cohen 2: 882).

The word scatter, from the Hebrew verb pāš, occurs three times (11:4, 8, 9). Pāš means to “disperse” or “scatter” and is used of sheep (Jer. 10:21) and of people, e.g., of an army being scattered by its enemies (Num. 10:35; 1 Kings 22:17) or of Israel being sent to gather straw in Egypt (Exod. 5:12; Hamilton 2: 719). It is possible that the people building the Tower of Babel were trying to avoid being scattered or defeated by an enemy, and saw building the tower as a defensive strategy (11:4).

Third, there is a word play between the Hebrew words bābel (“Babel”) and bālāl (“confuse”) which enhances the impact of the story. The Hebrew name of the tower, bābel (11:9), is derived from the Akkadian bāb-il, perhaps meaning “gate of god (or the gods),” and designates the great city of Babylon (Goldberg 1: 89; Ross 134). However, the word bābel sounds similar to the Hebrew word bālāl, which means “confused” (11:7, 9). Note that the word even sounds like a confused person making incoherent noises. We can infer that by linking bābel with bālāl (11:9), the text is ridiculing the whole social order of the Babylonians. They were a confused people!

Finally, the story identifies one purpose for building the tower as the people’s desire to make a name for themselves (11:4). The word name, or šēm in Hebrew, is a very common word (it occurs 864 times in the OT) and can mean “name” (Gen. 2:11, 13), “persons” (in the plural; Num. 1:18, 20), and “reputation,” along with a number of idiomatic meanings dependent upon associated verbs and prepositions. Most often it simply means the name or title of a person. But here, it would not make sense that the people simply wanted a label for themselves. Rather, it appears to be used with the sense of “renown,” “fame,” and “honor” (examples of the ways the NIV translates the term). A similar situation occurs in Genesis 6:4 where the Nephilim are described as men of renown (šēm). Hence, a second reason for the plans of the tower builders is that they might become famous. They were prideful and wanted acclaim (Kaiser 2: 934-35).

Relating the Parts

Internal relations. Looking within the passage, there are a number of parallel structures which invite comparison. For example, the introduction (11:1) parallels the conclusion (11:9) since both talk about language and both talk about the whole world (11:1, 9). There are also differences between the beginning and ending. The introduction talks about people “settling,” whereas the conclusion talks about people being “scattered.” The contrast between settling and scattering reveals that a significant transformation has occurred (Brueggemann, Genesis 98).

To understand the transformation, we should note the similarities between section one (11:2-4) and section two (11:5-8). Human action, “as they moved eastward” (11:2), is paralleled by divine action, “the LORD came down” (11:5). Both humans and the LORD make proposals: “come let us” (11:3-4, 7). Both take action (11:3, 5). Both have their purposes (11:4, 8). It is as if the reader is being invited to compare section one with section two (Brueggemann, Genesis 98).

The unit presents five contrasts. First, there is a contrast between human action (11:2-4) and divine action (11:5-8). People are building up into the heavens; the LORD is coming down from heaven. That the people are using bricks, a man-made material, might suggest an implicit contrast with stone, a divinely made material. Second, there is a contrast between human purpose (11:4d) and divine purpose (11:7-8). People desire to become famous and to resist being spread out over the earth; the LORD desires to end their project and scatter them over the earth. This may allude to the LORD’s desire for people to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:27).

A third contrast concerns the proposals. People propose to build a tower, with its top in the heavens (11:4). This recalls the earlier story of Adam’s and Eve’s desire to become like God, to attain divine knowledge (Gen. 3:5-6). In opposition to the tower builders, the LORD proposes to confound their quest and confuse their language (11:6). Fourth, the tower builders deliberate twice and make two proposals. In contrast, the LORD is decisive: deliberating once, proposing once, and acting once. Fifth, human purposes are thwarted (11:4); divine purposes succeed (11:8).
To summarize the internal relations, the tower builders’ conflict with the LORD is illustrated by their attempt to stay together (against the mandate of Gen 1:27), to make a name for themselves (glorifying themselves instead of God), and to become like God (to build a tower into the heavens; cf. Gen 3:5-6). In response, the LORD thwarts their efforts and scatters them.

External relations. The unit before our target text is Genesis 10:1-32, the “table of nations.” The table of nations suggests that the peoples were scattered over the earth (Gen 10:5, 10, 18b, 20, 31), each nation with its own language. The Tower story, in contrast, tells us why they were scattered: to fill the earth, and to limit an unhealthy combined strength.

The unit after our target text is Genesis 11:10–12:3, the account of Sennacherib, which leads to the introduction of Abram and Sarai. We find that Abram and Sarai obeyed the LORD, left the region of Babel, and spread out to a new land. They fulfilled the mandate of Genesis 1:27. In addition, we find a contrast between the Tower story and the Abram story. Whereas the LORD stopped the tower builders from making their name great, the LORD promised to make Abram’s name great because he obeyed the LORD (12:2; Brueggemann, Genesis 106).

Within the larger context of Genesis, the story of the tower builders forms part of the climax to the primeval prologue of Genesis 1-11. Genesis 3 reports the incursion of sin. From Genesis 4 through 10, sin spreads and intensifies until it reaches a crisis point with the story of the tower builders. Here, a new level of human sin is attained: sin becomes organized. So the LORD intervenes and stops the tower builders in Genesis 11. But immediately thereafter, the LORD initiates a new plan for humanity through Abraham in Genesis 12 (Roop 94). As the LORD has done in each of the previous stories of sin, the LORD responds not only with judgment but with grace.

Looking to the scope of the Bible as a whole, the Babel story of dispersion through the confusion of language is complemented by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter 2. In this event, the human race unites and can again understand itself. This is accomplished by God, directed toward the communication of salvation through Jesus Christ, and serves as harbinger of a harmonious international community of God (Brueggemann, Genesis 103-4). Both uniting and scattering (to share the gospel) become expressions of God’s blessing (Roop 84).

Historical Context. Scholars have discovered ancient stepped temples in Babylon and elsewhere in Mesopotamia called ziggurats. They had a sanctuary on the ground level and the particular god being honored was thought to appear at the summit. The zigurat of Marduk in Babylon (first millennium) was called the Etemenanki, “the house that is the foundation of heaven and earth.” The Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 probably referred to one of these temples built to honor the false gods of Israel’s neighbors (Brettl 1244-45).

Summary Statement
When people organized to build a city and tower to make themselves famous, the LORD thwarted their purpose by confusing their language and scattering them over the earth.

Apply to Life
I believe the Babel story has relevance for today. I have noted three implications which emerged during my study. The first is that by refusing to obey God, human beings may incur a divine response of judgment. On one level, Genesis 11:1-9 is a polemic against the Babylonians. Their story was included in Genesis to depict how not to live. They failed to obey the creation mandate and followed their own arrogant ambition. God’s judgment upon their actions resulted in social fragmentation and confusion.

On another level, the story is a general appeal to submit to God or suffer the consequences. This has significance for us today. The fragmentation, chaos, and confusion around us suggest that there is wide-scale disobedience in our society and in our world. Acts 2 provides hope of a new work of God that might lead to the reunion and wholeness of the human race. However, divisions, quarreling, and strife (even within the church itself) suggest that there is much left to do. Doing the will of God will help create a stable community and overcome social chaos. One thing I can do is to speak positively about people as much as possible, and refuse to participate in harmful gossip.

Second, God has created us with tremendous potential for both good and evil (Brueggemann, In Man 118-19). When we choose against God, corporate sin generates incredible evil. Subtly, sometimes ruthlessly, often unwittingly, social institutions can become highly developed in organizing and promoting sin. This was the case with the Tower of Babel.
It is the most insidious type of sin. No one person seems responsible. Few people attempt to change the system or even know where to begin. For example, much of what we produce in the United States, financed by the tax dollars of millions of people, are weapons for destroying the image of God: human beings. It has been estimated that every person in the U.S. contributes more than 700 dollars per year for the production of weapons. One way I can respond is to appeal to my elected national representatives to encourage life-affirming policies.

The third implication is that there is danger in focusing on the highest achievements of one’s society. The tower builders rallied around a monument which symbolized the highest technological accomplishment of their culture. In the process, they forsook God and the creation mandate to care for the world. Similarly, we should also recognize the achievements of our society as monuments to human control, power, and attempted divinity. Once we have achieved the ability to accomplish a particular course of action, we sometimes appear incapable of evaluating whether or not we should actually do so or not.

An ominous example in our time is experimentation with genetic engineering. In addition to the potential for improved crops and healing human diseases, this zeal to manipulate life may have unforeseen consequences. Perhaps the movie Jurassic Park provides a hopeful warning against the folly of treating the powerful building blocks of creation too casually. I need to support efforts to set limits on this kind of experimentation.

Works Cited


---. In Man We Trust. Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1972.


FORMAL INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

by
Sue Didaskalos

Table of Contents

I. Introduction ........................................ 1
II. Finding the Unit ................................... 3
III. Outline ............................................. 1
IV. Researching the Words .............................. 2
V. Relating the Parts ................................... 4
VI. Summary Statement ................................ 7
VII. Apply to Life ..................................... 7
VIII. Works Cited ....................................... 8

RS 100 G: The Bible in the Modern World
Professor H. Moreh
August 24, 2004
Introduction

In Luke 12:13-21 a man asks Jesus to act as a judge between himself and his brother. But Jesus refuses, and instead tells a parable about a rich man. I remember as a child reading a book about the rich fool and thinking what a horrible man he was. Researching for this paper gave me the opportunity to deepen my perspective on this parable. I used the TNIV version of the Bible.

Find the Unit

In the unit preceding Luke 12:13-21—which is Luke 12:1-12—Jesus is teaching his disciples, warning them against the Pharisees and false teachers. He also assures them of help when they are persecuted. This instruction is interrupted in v. 13 by a man asking Jesus to arbitrate the family inheritance. The new unit is evident by a new character (the man) and a new topic. Jesus first addresses the man, then addresses the crowd.

The following unit, Luke 12:22-34, is introduced by the narrator who indicates a shift of audience away from the crowd. “Then Jesus said to his disciples...” What he says in these verses elaborates on the implications of the parable found in 12:13-21.

Luke 12:13-21 is unified by the scene (a man makes a request and Jesus responds) and by its content (the issue the man raises and the parable Jesus tells in reply). The theme is the danger of greed.

Outline

I. Dialogue between a Man and Jesus (12:13-14)
   A. Man’s Request (v. 13)
      1. Narrator: Someone in the crowd said to him (13a)
      2. Man’s address: “Teacher,” (13b)
      3. Man’s demand: “Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” (13c)
   B. Jesus’ Response (v. 14)
      1. Narrator: Jesus replied (14a)
      2. Jesus’ address: “Man,” (14b)
      3. Rhetorical question: “Who appointed me a judge or arbiter between you?” (14c)

II. Jesus’ Teaching (12:15-21)
   A. Jesus’ Warnings (15)
      1. Narrator: Then he said to them, (15a)
      2. Quotation (15b-16)
         a. Command 1: “Watch out!” (15b)
         b. Command 2: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” (15c)
         c. Explanation: “Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” (15d)
   B. Jesus’ Parable (vv. 16-21)
      1. Narrator: And he told them this parable, (16a)
      2. Situation: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.” (16b)

3. Rich man’s self-reflection (17-19)
   a. Parable narrator: He thought to himself, (17a)
   b. Thoughts (17b-c)
      i. Question: “What shall I do?” (17b)
      ii. Statement of appraisal: “I have no place to store my crops.” (17c)
   c. Parable narrator: Then he said, (18a)
   d. Rich man’s soliloquy (18e-19)
      i. Statement 1: “This is what I’ll do.” (18c)
         a. Plans to build: “I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones.” (18d)
         b. Plans to accumulate: “and there I will store my surplus grain.” (18e)
      ii. Statement 2: “And I’ll say to myself,” (19a)
         a. Basis of confidence: “You have... grain laid up for many years.” (19b)
         b. Personal goals: “Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.” (19c)

4. God’s Statements (20)
   a. Parable narrator: But God said to him, (20a)
   b. Quotation (20b-d)
      i. Rebuke: “You fool!” (20b-d)
      ii. Prediction: “This very night your life will be demanded from you.” (20c)
      iii. Question: “Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” (20d)

5. Jesus’ Conclusion (21)
   a. Introduction: “This is how it will be with those” (21a)
   b. Description 1: “who store up things for themselves” (21b)
   c. Description 2: “but are not rich toward God.” (21c)

Research the Key Words/Phrases

The first word I researched within Luke 12:13-21 is rich which appears in vv. 16 and 21. These two are translated from the Greek words ploutos and ploutoú respectively. Ploutos (adjective) and ploutueí (verb) come from the ploutos (noun) word group used throughout the New Testament within two different contexts. First, they are used in reference to material things and refer to accumulating wealth. The evaluations in these contexts are always negative. For example, Jesus warns that it is nearly impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23-24; Mark 10:23-25; Luke 18:24-25). Also, within the parable of Lazarus, the rich man is condemned to eternal pain because of his absorption with riches (Luke 16:19-31). James warns the ploutos (rich) that their wealth will fail them and they will be condemned to fire (James 5:1-6).

The church of Laodicea is reported to be materially wealthy, and yet apparently their riches have led them to be lukewarm, motivating God to spit them from his mouth (Rev. 3:14-22). The word rich describes people of the world, those who cling to the things in this life, and are thus prevented from entering the next. As the description of the wealthy man in Luke’s parable makes clear, the first use of rich (v. 16) is used in this way (Selter, “Rich” 843-44).
The second use of the *ploutos* word group does not primarily concern material things but is used of God’s values and blessings. Paul speaks of Christ’s poverty making us rich (2 Cor. 8:9), and in Ephesians he refers to God as being “rich in mercy” (2:4). 1 Timothy 6:17 admonishes the *ploutios* (rich) to put no confidence in wealth but to put their hope in God who “*plousiados* (richly) provides.” James 2:5 speaks of being rich in faith. The church of Smyrna is praised for being rich even in their poverty (Rev. 2:9). The *ploutos* word group, when used in such contexts, is always positive. The riches of God, such as faith, hope, and love, are things to be greatly desired and pursued, in contrast to the riches of this world, which are to be renounced. This positive use is evident in Luke 12:21 where the accumulation of material things is contrasted with richness toward God (Selter, “Rich” 843-44).

Another important word within this passage of Scripture is *greed*. It occurs only once, in verse 15, and yet represents the central theme in the passage. *Greed* is translated from the Greek word *pleonexia*, which means an immoral desire for something (usually material), such as greed, avarice, covetousness, or insatiableness. *Pleonexia* is used nine other times in the New Testament. Three of those times it is included in a list of sin and vices that should be avoided by the righteous (Rom. 1:29; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5). The other times it is always spoken of negatively. Ephesians 4:19 speaks of the Gentiles who have a continual *pleonexia* (lust) for more impurity. 2 Peter 2:3 warns against the false teachers who, because of *pleonexia*, spread false teachings. In almost every instance, *pleonexia* is a characteristic in the life of a person who does not know God. It seems that those who are full of and controlled by *greed* are kept from the kingdom of God (Selter, “Greed” 138).

Finally, there is the word *fool*, translated from the Greek word *aphron*, which God calls the rich man in v. 20. The word means a “lack of insight and reason” (Goetzman 1024). *Aphron* is used ten other times in the New Testament. Jesus calls the Pharisees “fools” (*aphron*) for believing that what is outside the body can make it unclean (Luke 11:40). Paul often uses *aphron* in reference to himself, sometimes stating that he is an *aphron* to boast and sometimes saying that he can boast without being an *aphron*. However, some of the most striking uses of the word are found in Ephesians and Romans. Ephesians 5:17 warns us not to “be foolish (*aphron*)” but understand what the Lord’s will is.” Romans 2:18-20 parallels *aphron* with the blind, the darkened, and the infants. *Aphron* is one who does not know God’s will and, for that matter, does not know God. He or she simply gropes about with no understanding of what is truly important, and so spends his or her time on the meaningless and the trivial.

Relate the Parts

**Internal Relations.** The parable is introduced with a reference to brothers quarreling over material things (v.13) and Jesus’ warning against greed (v. 15). Then, after the parable concludes, Jesus goes on to teach his disciples that life is more than possessions, even those which are most essential (Luke 12:22-34; Bailey 58).

Jesus tells the parable in a way which highlights its theme. The story begins in third person with the narrator outside the situation looking in (vv. 16-17). But soon the rich man himself takes over, narrating his own story in disregard for anyone or anyone but himself (vv. 18-19; Scott 129). Also notable is the frequent use of the word “my” throughout the passage, used four times in verses 17 and 18 (Culpepper 256). The story’s style thus emphasizes that the rich man’s entire attention and all of his efforts are invested in himself.

But at verse 20, the man’s dialogue with himself is abruptly interrupted by a new character: God, who challenges and wrests control away from the rich man. Although the man is still the main subject of the parable, the story has ceased to revolve around him. When God enters the picture, the rich man’s delusion of self-importance is shattered (Scott 137).

Another interesting set of contrasts is found between the rich man’s plans for the future in verse 19 and God’s statements in verse 20 of what will actually take place. The rich man plans “for many years” of life and enjoyment; God responds that his life will end “this very night.” The rich man revels in the “plenty of good things” he has accumulated; God responds that his riches will be given to someone else. The rich man places his confidence in having “laid up” or saved many things; God responds that, even so, he will lose his “life.” Although possessing so much, the man will lose what is really important (Scott 138).

In v. 21, the statements “stores up things” and “is . . . rich toward” are more similar than the TNIV translation indicates. In the original language, both phrases are active rather than passive. A
better translation for "rich toward" would be "gathering riches for" (Bailey 68-69). The two phrases present two different courses of action which seem to be mutually exclusive. One cannot seek to enrich both himself and God. He must seek one or the other.

A contrast previously mentioned concerns the uses of the word rich in this passage. As discussed in the word research section, the first use (v. 16) is in reference to being materially rich. The passage states that the rich man had land (which in itself signifies wealth). It also implies that the man had much even before he received his unusually good crop (Nolland 688). However, the second use of rich in the parable reveals that the man was not rich at all, not in the way that mattered (v. 21). The second rich refers to heavenly treasure, a kind of wealth that the man failed to possess. The passage ends ironically, in essence saying, "There once was a rich man who was not rich at all."

**External Relations.** One of the many interesting comparisons that can be made between this passage in Luke 12:13-21 and other passages in the Bible concerns Jesus' rebuke to the demand that is made of him. He says (v. 14), "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" This response is strikingly similar to one against Moses in Exodus 2:14. A slave rebukes him for trying to break up a fight by saying, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?"

The parallels are ironic. Moses seeks to judge even when he is not wanted and is rebuked in almost the same words as Jesus who refuses to judge when asked (Bailey 61). It is also interesting to point out that Moses did at times act as a judge when it came to an dividing inheritance (Num. 27:1-11; 36). Jesus' blunt refusal to help might be a way of rejecting the role of a simple teacher of the Law, or of saying he is not just another Moses.

On the other hand, perhaps Jesus is also refusing to do something else. The disciple is asking Jesus' help in dividing an inheritance. It was common practice for the sons to share the inheritance and to live together on the land. A division of the land occurred only when one of the brothers felt the need to break relationship with his other brothers. Jesus is not only refusing to act as judge. He is refusing to be a party to breaking relationships. He values reconciliation too much to help cause division (Bailey 59).

---

"The theme of riches and possessions is one that is often addressed throughout the Bible and especially in Luke. This passage (Luke 12:13-21) is complemented by many others in the book. Luke makes it a theme to emphasize that the rich will not gain eternal life and that the kingdom of God is for the poor. In Luke 1:53, Mary sings that the Lord "has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." In Luke 4:18, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 and claims that he has come to "preach good news to the poor." Jesus says almost the same thing again in Luke 7:22 (as well as Matt. 11:5) when he sends a message to John saying that good news is being preached to the poor. In Luke 18:25 (also Matt. 19:24; Mark 10:25) Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (see also Luke 6:24; 8:14; 14:13; 16:19-31; 21:1-4). Jesus says throughout Luke that the rich will be excluded from the kingdom of God, while the poor will be rewarded.

On the other hand, we find that there were rich people in the Bible who were also righteous. Abraham was the father of God's people Israel and had many possessions. In fact, God promised to bless him with material things (Gen. 15:7). Job was blameless before God, and yet was very wealthy (Job 1:1-4). Joseph of Arimathea, the man who buried Jesus, is described as rich (Matt. 27:57).

**Historical Context.** It was helpful to learn that traditional Middle Easterners have always been very community-oriented. They often live in a close-knit society where several generations share the same house. Men, both then and now, spend hours at the city gate discussing transactions and what the proper decision on an issue should be. Problems are solved in community, after hours upon hours of debate and interaction between friends and family (Bailey 64-65).

All of this contrasts sharply with the approach of the rich man in his text. He addresses his problem to himself. He decides the solution by himself. It even seems that the rich man has no family, for God asks, "Who will receive what you have stored up for yourself?" It appears the man has no direct heir (cf. Eccl. 4:7-8). All of this isolation would have been glaringly different from most people of his culture. He lives in a vacuum, alone with his possessions (Bailey 64-65).
Summary Statement

Refusing to arbitrate an inheritance dispute, Jesus warned against greed by telling the parable of a rich fool who sought to accumulate wealth, but lost his life as a result.

Apply to Life

On the one hand, this text seems to say that wealth is bad, just as throughout the Scriptures there is a theme of God defending the poor and judging the rich. The first mistake the rich man made was accumulating material wealth, or making himself rich. Our possessions easily separate us from God and his will (1 Tim. 6:10). And when our focus is on ourselves, it is not on God. In fact, it becomes a form of idolatry. Matthew 16:26 says it very well: “What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?” I need to evaluate how much I am worshiping my possessions.

Yet, as noted above, the Bible presents a number of wealthy yet righteous people. Is it possible to be wealthy and still righteous?

To answer that question, we must note that the rich man’s second mistake was not being rich toward, or, more accurately, not gathering riches for God. His worship of wealth kept him from doing and being what God required. Recognizing that Jesus’ parable provides a negative example, we can make application by exploring the opposite of the rich fool’s attitudes and actions. As he lived for himself, we should live for others. As the rich man was arrogant, placing himself above others, we should be humble, considering others better than ourselves. As the rich man was greedy, we should be generous. As the rich man trusted himself and his plans, we should trust God and seek only his will.

Whatever my level of wealth, I need to keep asking, “How can I use the resources, including material wealth, which I have been given to contribute to God’s purposes in this world?”

Works Cited


