

## cultural context

## STORY CONTEXT:

- The town of Jericho lies near the southern end of the Jordan River – not far from the Dead Sea. Jesus and his disciples would have followed the Jordan Valley down from Galilee prior to making their way up to Jerusalem.
- When special dignitaries were approaching a town, it was commonplace for the local residents to go out to meet them in a large group. The further they travelled from the town centre, the greater the respect being shown to the dignitary.
- Unlike with other wealthy citizens, the Jewish crowd would not give way to a collaborator. A tax collector could have risked his life by being caught in the middle of a surging crowd.
- As a rich man Zacchaeus performed two undignified public acts in an honour and shame society. He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a tree: these were the actions of children.
- It is likely a sycamore tree was chosen because it has low, easy to climb branches and a dense foliage in which Zacchaeus could hide.

## TAX COLLECTOR:

- The tax collector was generally a local person who had acquired the rights to collect taxes for the Romans for a pre-determined up-front fee annually. The tax collector would then endeavour, sometimes unscrupulously, to recover his investment by taxing merchants to make a profit. Taxes or tolls were generally charged on goods (salted fish) being sent to other regions for sale.
- Taxes were collected only with Roman coins. Generally devout Jews would have avoided carrying Roman coins as they depicted the 'deified' Roman emperor which made the coin idolatrous (Changing coins in the Temple – Ch 5.7).
- Tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the occupying force and were considered 'unclean' under rabbinical law. Tax collectors were viewed as having attained power without fulfilling the traditional Jewish requirements of an honourable birth and devotion to learning the Torah.

## INTERACTION WITH JESUS:

- For a visitor to invite himself to someone's house was inappropriate. For Jesus, a rabbi, to choose to visit a sinner's house was totally unacceptable, especially as it would defile him ahead of his journey to the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Exaggerated language ('half of my possessions...to the poor') in Middle Eastern culture was not so much to be taken literally: it is meant to show a genuine sign of good faith that proper restitution would be made. In fact, if Zacchaeus had not exaggerated the listeners would not have believed he was sincere in his intentions.
- The reference to repaying anyone who had been cheated four-fold (or 400%) was the harshest penalty that would have been applied under Roman Law for making reparation to the Roman Emperor. Jewish law only required a person to pay full restitution plus 20%.
- In an honour and shame society, to affirm someone as the 'son of Abraham' was the ultimate acknowledgement of an individual's worth and dignity as a Jew.

## SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT:

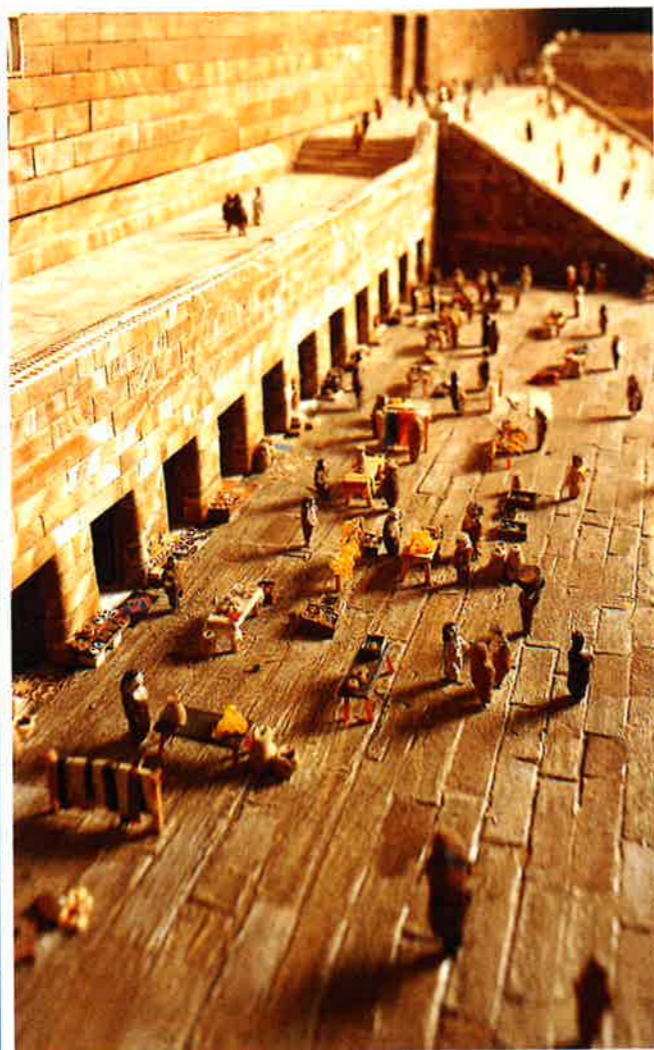
- This story occurs immediately after Jesus heals the blind man on his way into Jericho (Lk 18: 35-43). By joining both stories together readers can see that Jesus' ministry was both to the oppressed (the blind man) and the oppressor (a tax collector for the Romans).

Related Cultural Sources: *The Temple (5.7)* and *Potential for Shame (1.3)*

### Moneychanging

Those who worked with money had plenty of opportunity for employment. Money-changers were needed when specific coinage was required and ten percent was normally charged for the exchange. Most important was the money used in the Temple, where it was needed to pay the tax and to pay for sacrificial animals that had been certified as ritually clean. Some people believe that Nehemiah minted special coinage for this purpose (Nehemiah 10:32) and that this practice had been continued. Twelve percent was

Scale model of Herod's Temple, showing the traders' booths outside the Temple Mount. The traders included moneychangers, whom Jesus drove out when he cleansed the temple.



charged for such exchanges.

When Jesus drove out the money-changers in the Temple he seems to have been acting out the principle of two messianic prophecies (Psalm 69:9; Malachi 3:1–4; see John 2:17). It was not that the moneychangers were doing anything criminal but that it was not an activity good enough for the house of God (Matthew 21:13).

People who exchanged money were also able to make loans (in fact the table over which money passed was called a “bank”). Jesus suggested in his story of the money entrusted to the king’s stewards, that it might have been invested so as to make interest (Matthew 25:27; Luke 19:23). There is an issue here that needs to be understood. In Old Testament times, life was based upon a simple agricultural economy. Nobody needed loans for investment; loans were needed to tide a person over hard times. For this reason, charges of interest was not allowed because that would have been making a profit out of a brother’s plight (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:53; Deuteronomy 23:19). But such profit from interest could be made out of a foreigner (Deuteronomy 23:20). By New Testament times, the economy had changed, and it was possible to lend money to support a business venture and to expect a return for it, as in the parables. But Jesus still disapproved of private loans at interest (Luke 6:34).

### Taxation

Others were employed in taxation. In the early days of Israel’s history, taxation was used only to support the Tabernacle and Temple (Deuteronomy

### Terms for money

The terms used for money in the New Testament illustrate the problems Bible translators actually face. If they use the original term, it might be meaningless to the reader. If they substitute the name of a current coin, or a monetary value, then inflation might make the substitute completely out of date in a short time. ‘Pieces of silver’ or a ‘day’s wages’ does not always indicate the value of the coinage because amounts vary in different societies.

14:22–27; 18:1–5). When the people wanted a king, Samuel warned them that they would face increased taxation (1 Samuel 8:15), and so it proved. Solomon’s building programme and life-style (1 Kings 4:22–28) demanded heavy taxation. Tax commissioners were appointed by the king for twelve districts (1 Kings 4:7–19), and the burden of taxation was so high that it caused a rebellion that divided the kingdom very soon after Solomon’s death (1 Kings 12:4).

There is evidence that this form of taxation continued in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Ostraca found in a Samaritan storehouse included receipts for oil and wine, and the handles of jars found throughout Judah indicated that the jars contained oil and wine sent to the king. Even the first cuttings of the grass seem to have been taxed during the time of Amos (Amos 7:1).

The most objectionable form of taxation was the payment of protection money. It was the practice of powerful kings to force their neighbours to pay them taxes. Any infringement would

be regarded as rebellion and would be followed by a punitive expedition from the army of the more powerful state. Tiglath Pileser of Assyria extracted such tribute from Israel while Menahem was king (2 Kings 15:19–20), and Necho of Egypt did the same thing to Jehoahaz of Judah (2 Kings 23:33–35).

In New Testament times, tribute by taxation had to be paid to the Roman Empire. Roman officials would sell the right to collect taxes in an area to the highest bidder. The tax commissioner (chief publican) would then have to supply a certain amount of money. He would employ local people as the collectors (publicans), and both commissioner and collectors would tax excessively so that they made a good living as well as passing on what was required by the government. Zacchaeus as chief publican admitted fraud by restoring goods fourfold (Luke 19:8). Levi would have been a local collector (Luke 5:27). The Jews hated the publicans, not only because the publicans took the Jews’ money, but because publicans were regarded as traitors to the occupying power. The name was therefore a name of derision. Jewish leaders could not accept Jesus’ friendship with such people (Matthew 9:11; 11:19; 21:31). Dislike of the publicans was not entirely unjustified. John the Baptist spoke generally of the need of the publicans not to be greedy (Luke 3:12).

### Trading

A living was also made from the profits of trading. This did not happen in early days because the simple agricultural economy not only gave no profit