

## **“Today salvation has come to this house...” (Lk 19:1-10)<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

#### **“Today salvation has come to this house...” (Lk 19:1-10)**

*In this article, the story of the conversion of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 is studied against the background of Nigerian society. The importance of Zacchaeus' story lies in the fact that it remains a paradigm of how wealthy Christians are to make use of their wealth. His example will be advanced for emulation by many a Nigerian wealthy Christian as a way of wealth redistribution.*

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

According to Luke, Jesus claims to have come for the salvation of the poor (Lk 4:18-19; 7:22; Math 11:4-5). However, Luke reports Jesus' association with many rich people. He had meals with the Pharisees (Lk 7:36, 11:37, 14:1), for example, and some of the women who always followed him were of considerable wealth as they were able to provide for him and his disciples “of their substance” (Lk 8:2-3). Despite this, the Gospel of Luke assumes a well known anti-rich stance – more so than that of any other Gospel. In fact, it almost gives the impression that the rich have no hope of salvation (18:24-25) even though it is confident that, “What is impossible for men is possible for God” (18:27). Within this milieu, the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 provides a classical Lucan answer to the question of how a wealthy person can be saved. It also illustrates how a wealthy Christian can wisely use his/her wealth.

According to Luke, Zacchaeus readily received the salvation that Jesus imparted and did all that Jesus had commanded (cf Burrige 1994:118). This sinful tax collector repented of having defrauded others and his salvation was total. He was indeed ready to prove his repentance with everything at his disposal, his wealth included. He did not allow his wealth to blind him to the inevitable damnation of wealth without God. That is why he was acceptable to Jesus regardless of his past sinful life of fraud. Zacchaeus therefore remains an epitome of humility in the face of wealth and is worthy of emulation by many a wealthy Christian.

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Not a few Nigerian Christians find themselves in the same position as Zacchaeus prior to his encounter with Jesus. They have used their positions to defraud their fellow Nigerians and have become extremely wealthy. However, they lack the qualities that made Zacchaeus a beneficiary of the salvation that Jesus imparted to him and his family. This article critiques the thinking and behaviour of such people. It explores the various factors that have come to play a decisive role in Zacchaeus' transformation from a disgraced chief publican to a blessed partaker of salvation. Ultimately, it examines the possible challenges that Zacchaeus' story may pose for the church in general and Nigerian Christians in particular. After examining the Nigerian context of interpretation (2) i.e. the activities of fraudulent state officials *vis-à-vis* wealth and the rich in the Nigerian society, the article briefly reviews the story of Zacchaeus (3.1) and the opinions of some current scholars regarding it (3.2) The social context of this story is then clarified (4.) after which the article explores the challenge that this story poses for the rich in Nigerian society (5.). This is followed in the final instance by the conclusion in section 6.

## **2 THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT OF INTERPRE-TATION**

Nigerian society is replete with many a pre-conversion Zacchaeus. The first of these are Zacchaeus' colleagues in modern society – the customs officials. What we know of Zacchaeus as a tax or toll collector and of the Nigerian customs officials makes it seem as though the profession has a propensity towards fraudulent practices. A good number of Nigerian customs officials are as fraudulent as the toll collectors/officers of the Second Testament period were. Some of them are extremely rich just as Zacchaeus was. They usually become wealthy, not on account of their salaries, but by extorting merchants who move goods across the borders of Nigeria.

Many Zacchaeuses are also found in the Nigerian police. They extort money from commercial vehicle drivers on highways even when the latter have not committed any traffic offences. It is well known that false charges have been levied against drivers who have refused to give the police money for simply driving on the highways. It is also known that high-ranking police officers have supplied arms and ammunitions to criminals such as armed robbers for handsome pay. A case in point is that of S P Iyamu who was executed in 1988 for supplying arms to a gang of deadly armed robbers, the Anini gang. This officer owned many landed properties and a variety of cars and was extremely rich. Some members of the police have also accepted huge sums of money to destroy vital documents needed in criminal cases in order to derail a criminal's conviction. Others have accepted handsome bribes to divulge

official secrets to accused persons standing trial in order to pervert justice.

Zacchaeuses are found among many professionals in Nigeria, such as immigration officers, prison officers, and Vehicle Inspection Officers (VIOs). Such officers thrive on extorting money from their fellow Nigerians and foreigners with whom they conduct business. A particular group of such extortioners deserves special mention. This group is known as 419 after the section of the Nigerian Criminal code that prohibits their offence. The latter is referred to as Advance Fee Fraud (*Sunday Tribune* 25 June 2000:9,11). Perpetrators of this crime divest their victims of huge sums of money on false pretexts. They usually operate international networks. They are extremely wealthy, well connected and highly powerful in Nigerian society.

Apart from the above-mentioned categories of wealthy Nigerians, there are others who have become wealthy by embezzling public funds or betraying colleagues during industrial action. During a recent Nigerian Labour Congress, for example, it was reported that some labour leaders had approached the Government to negotiate for the end of a nation-wide strike against Government's arbitrary increase of petroleum product prices less than twenty-four hours after the strike was launched. The President of the Congress, however, stood opposed to this action (*Sunday Tribune*, 25 June 2000:1,4).

Between May and June 2000, it was alleged that some Senate principal officers had embezzled public funds. They were eased out of their positions in August 2000 after being indicted by a Senate panel that had been set up to probe the allegations against them (*Sunday Tribune*, 6 August 2000:9,11,12,14; *Nigerian Tribune*, 1 August 2000:1-2,23).

Then there are those who have made their wealth by armed robbery or by being patrons to armed robbers. There are also others who have become wealthy by dealing in illegal drugs or practicing illicit professions such as prostitution.

Thus, as we can see from the preceding examples, there are many members of Nigerian society who build their wealth at the expense of others, just as the Biblical Zacchaeus had done prior to his conversion. In addition to this, most wealthy Nigerians do not spend their money on projects that will not receive public acknowledgement. Concern for the poor or the less privileged hardly commands their attention. Some wealthy Christians barely behave differently. They do not seem to care at all for the poor around them. Many wealthy Nigerian Christians only care about their own business, which is to make more money. They are just like the Biblical Zacchaeus who was unconcerned with his people's condemnation of his trade, but was content with the huge wealth he was accumulating at the expense of his fellows.

In my opinion, the story of Zacchaeus serves as a reminder to such people that money is not everything and that, where it is available, there is a way of utilising it wisely without losing sight of salvation. Hence my attempt to interpret the story of Zacchaeus against the unmitigated hustle for wealth accumulation in Nigerian society. I begin then with a brief review of Zacchaeus' story and some scholarly interpretations thereof as stipulated in the Introduction.

### **3 ZACCHEUS: STORY AND SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION**

#### **3.1 Zacchaeus: A brief analytical review of the pericope**

The Zacchaeus pericope is particular to Luke and may have been derived from his special "L" source (Fitzmyer 1985b:1218). It belongs to that central part of Luke's Gospel called the travel account (Lk 9:51–19:27). This is a collection of Jesus' parables and teachings that Manson (1975:282) has termed "The Gospel of the Outcast". The material in these chapters relays God's mercy and compassion for the lost and the rejected. It intimates that the Evangelist is concerned here with one of the main dilemmas of the early church and indeed of every Christian community, *viz* the acceptance of the repentant "outcast" into the life of the community (Hobbie 1977:286). This theme reverberates throughout Luke 15-19. It is, however, more pronounced in Luke 18, which is particularly significant for the story of Zacchaeus. All the parables and teachings of this chapter help to shed light on Zacchaeus' story, which concludes the travel account: the importunate widow (18:1-8), the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14,) receiving the kingdom as a little child (18:15-17), the vignette of the rich ruler (18:18-31), and the blind man at the side of the road (18:35-43). Amongst these, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and the story of the rich young ruler, bear special significance for the present study:

In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus relates a parable to the self-righteous about a Pharisee who, during prayer, thanks God that he is better than other men - especially the tax collector who is humbly praying for God's mercy some distance away from him in the temple. In Luke 18:18-30 we come across the rich ruler whose wealth prevents him from following Jesus and entering the kingdom of God. Once he departs from Jesus, the latter remarks, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (18:24b-25). This elicits the following question from the hearers, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus' answers: "What is impossible for men is possible for God".

Zacchaeus' story in Luke 19 is to be understood and interpreted against the backdrop of these two pericopes (Hobbie 1977:286). It obviously functions as a contrast to the story of the rich ruler that precedes it. Even so, there are certain similarities between Zacchaeus and the rich ruler. Both, for example, are wealthy men (*plousios*). Luke regarded the wealthy as cursed because they seek fulfilment now, serve "mammon" rather than God - even though they may keep the commandments, they assume a mantle of leadership and demand respect, and worst still, neglect the poor. They cannot enter the kingdom of God. When we begin reading the Zacchaeus pericope with Luke's portrayal of rich people and the story of the rich ruler in mind, we are inclined to wonder how Zacchaeus - a rich man and a hated tax-collector - may be saved (cf Loewe 1974:322-323). Would his wealth impede his chances of salvation? The answer is "no", yielding a favourable comparison between him and the rich ruler.

The story of Zacchaeus also finds favourable comparison with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We note, for example, that the tax-collector in the parable was justified by God's grace even though he had no good works to boast of whilst the Pharisee had many. Zacchaeus was accepted and justified in the same manner as his parabolic colleague. He, a lost sinner, responded positively to Jesus' visitation. He generously redistributed half of his wealth amongst the poor and made fourfold recompense to those whom he had defrauded from the rest. In so doing, he went far beyond the expectations of charity and exceeded the requirements of the law with regard to restitution, *viz* one and one fifth (Lev 6:5). This amply demonstrated his commitment to a new life and culminated in the salvation that Jesus imparted to him and his family. (Please note: Jesus' declaration, "Today salvation has come to this house..." followed immediately after Zacchaeus' decision to redistribute his wealth [so too Schweizer 1982:34]). By contrast, the rich ruler who had kept the commandments of God since birth was unable to part with his wealth. As a result, he could not receive the kingdom of God that was imparted to him when he encountered Jesus. He had to choose between his wealth and the kingdom of God. He chose his wealth and lost the kingdom. Zacchaeus was confronted with the same choice. He chose the kingdom and was saved, even though his source of wealth was illicit whilst, by comparison, the rich ruler appears to have made his money legitimately. Zacchaeus demonstrated his repentance by his actions. As a result, he was cured from the love of money that had enslaved him to this world (Goulder 1989:677; Gooding 1987:299) and reinstated in his identity as a Jew, a son of Abraham (*vide* 4.1 and 4.2 below). He therefore becomes a model of how a rich person may find salvation through repentance (cf Tuckett 1996:98).

## 3.2 Some scholarly interpretations of the Zacchaeus pericope

The Zacchaeus pericope is a vibrant and popular one that has received ample attention from scholars. Christian tradition has persistently viewed it as a conversion or salvation story in which the sinful tax collector, confronted by the person of Jesus, resolves to turn over a new leaf in his career with the words ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore *him* fourfold’ (Lk 19:8). Against this traditional position, strong arguments have emerged in the modern era that call attention to another interpretation, which suggests that Zacchaeus’ words should be read as a defence of his good deeds rather than as a statement of intent to turn over a new leaf. A survey of scholars whose works reaffirm the traditional position on the one hand (3.2.1), and those that propose the alternative interpretation - an apologia interpretation - on the other (3.2.2), deserves our attention.

### 3.2.1 Scholars who affirm the traditional position

Marshall (1978:694,697) sees the Zacchaeus pericope as “a supreme example of the universality of the gospel offer to tax collectors and sinners, with Jesus taking the initiative and inviting himself to the house of Zacchaeus”. Even so, Jesus’ action was certainly not a **gratuitous** one. It was prompted by the interest that the toll collector had shown in him. Yet, it is true that the decisive action, the will, came from Jesus. According to Marshall, Zacchaeus joyously promised to utilise his wealth to assist the poor and to make restitution for his former evil deeds, that is, the extortion of his people. In his view, Zacchaeus’ public declaration indicated his intention to live a new life and that was an adequate sign of repentance. Such a life-change was characteristic of the reception of salvation.

Hobbie (1977:286-288), who sees the tax collector’s action as an embodiment of faith, remarks that Zacchaeus was driven to climb the tree by the expectation that seeing who Jesus was would resolve the dilemma of his life. For Hobbie, Jesus’ visit to Zacchaeus was nothing short of a divine mission that testifies to the act of divine mercy toward the tax collector. Hobbie believes that Zacchaeus, overwhelmed by Jesus’ action of mercy, joyfully affirmed a new lifestyle, giving half of his wealth to the poor and making fourfold restitution to those whom he had defrauded with the other half. The outcast tax collector acknowledged the gift of grace and demonstrated this by a concrete life-change. According to Hobbie, salvation entered Zacchaeus’ house when he encountered the person of Jesus and responded to Jesus’ mercy with concrete acts of repentance.

After establishing the Lucanness and historicity of the Zacchaeus episode<sup>2</sup>, O'Hanlon (1981:2-9,13,17,19,21,22) endeavours to show that it summarises many of Luke's major themes found in both the Gospel and Acts, and particularly in the Gospel. Like Hobbie (1977:286f), O'Hanlon believes that Zacchaeus did not try to see Jesus out of an idle curiosity to see an important personality; rather, he wanted to find out who Jesus was. When he encountered Jesus as one who saves, he gladly responded and gave evidence of his repentance by pledging to help the poor and make reparations for his evil past. In the words of O'Hanlon, the restitution that he resolved to make, "must surely refer to a single act of restitution". Zacchaeus thus remains the only rich man who *comes out well in Luke* because he gave half of his wealth to the poor and so avoided the fate of the rich. In the place of his riches, the tax collector received the ultimate and more enduring wealth - salvation and forgiveness of his sinful past.

In his commentary on the third gospel, Schweizer (1984:291-292) observes that Jesus was already a guest in the house of Zacchaeus before the latter responded as he did. Reconciliation had taken place before he had made any restitution. Jesus broke into Zacchaeus' normal daily life. That was evident in the murmur Jesus' visit aroused. However, everything depended on whether the chief publican could do the very thing that the devout were least able to accomplish, i.e. whether he could sense what had taken place and respond to it. In Schweizer's estimation, Zacchaeus achieved this with his pledge of charity and restitution.

In his exposition of Luke, Gooding (1987:299-300) advances the opinion that Zacchaeus not only saw who Jesus was, but that he also discovered his own long-lost identity from the moment of his encounter with Jesus. In Gooding's words, (1987:300) "He was a man loved by God with an eternal love, and longed for so much that God had sent his Son on purpose to find him and to rescue him from his lostness by coming personally to his home and bringing the sense of acceptance with God into his very heart". Zacchaeus then discovered that God's acceptance had given him what he had long sought for in vain from wealth. The mad drive to make money had gone. He confessed his sinful past and promised to make full restitution and compensate his victims. Zacchaeus recovered his true identity because he was accepted by Jesus. According to Gooding, Zacchaeus realised that he needed to learn and practise the Christian attitude to wealth in this present age if he was going to reign with Jesus in the kingdom of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Although it is exclusive to the Gospel of Luke, its historicity may not be doubted. There are several hints in the gospel tradition that support the historicity of the account (cf Marshall 1978:695, Schmidt 1987:159).

In his commentary, Evans (1990:660-661) appears to agree with Hobbie (1977:286ff) and O'Hanlon (1981) that little Zacchaeus' curiosity to see Jesus was motivated by the mind of faith in Jesus as Lord. Without being called to repentance, Zacchaeus simply met his conversion when Jesus invited himself to his house. He then responded to that clear divine act of mercy by solemnly making his double profession of intent before Jesus as a witness. Evans believes that the salvation imparted to Zacchaeus' house was a "reward" for his promise of renunciation and restoration (Evans 1990:661). However, saying that salvation was Zacchaeus' "reward" for restitution seems problematic. This is because, according to New Testament teaching, salvation comes not as a reward but as a gift through divine grace which, of course, calls for and leads to our kindness to others: "to whom much is given, of him will much be required" (Lk 12:48b).

Hamm (1988:431-433) reviews the apologia interpretation of Zacchaeus' story. He finds it hard to agree with the opinion that Zacchaeus' statements of intent were nothing but an apologia or a defence of himself. He wonders how giving half of one's possessions (*hyparchonta*) could be a description of one's customary behaviour (1988: 434-437). Rather, he argues that the most natural future reading of *apodidomi* would take the statement as a resolve to redress past fraud. He also contends that the aorist *esykophantesa* would be an unlikely word choice to denote unknowing involvement in injustice. The only other use of the word occurs in Luke 3:14 where John the Baptist uses it to refer to the kind of extortion which he exhorted the soldiers to avoid. Hamm feels that the word should be read as a delicate way of referring to past injustices that the speaker admits to. He argues further that verses 9 and 10 clearly interpret Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus as a manifestation of salvation. Jesus' declaration, "the Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost", refers most immediately to Zacchaeus. He was one who was lost and one whom Jesus had just sought and saved. Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus was a matter of a sinner experiencing salvation by repenting from his sinful past. Thus, according to Hann, Zacchaeus made no pretence to defend his sinful past. He merely repented of it by resolving to do as he said in verse 8.

### **3.2.2 The Apologia interpretation**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reading of the Zacchaeus' pericope departed widely from the traditional one. The pioneer of this new interpretation was F Godet who argued that far from being an example of salvation history, the story was one of Zacchaeus' defence or apologia. The pericope, Godet argued, must be understood as Zacchaeus' defence of himself before Jesus and other eye-witnesses. In other words, he was



describing his customary practice of giving half of his belongings to the poor and restoring fourfold those he had wrongly exploited (Hamm 1988:432). Godet's observation did not receive wide publicity at that time. It was, however, revived in the 1960's by Watson (1965-66:282-285) and Salom's (1966-67:87) brief exchange of notes in the *Expository Times*. White (1979) put forward a more systematised defence of this view later. He denied that Luke 19:8 implies conversion, basing his argument on a form-critical analysis of the pericope.

White (1979:87) argued that the pericope does not reflect what he calls a "salvation story". According to him, Lucan salvation stories usually consists of five elements:

- 1) A clear indication that the subject is a sinner and Jesus' mention of that sin.
- 2) The subject's self-effacing speech and behaviour.
- 3) Deference to the power of Jesus and petition for his mercy.
- 4) A forgiveness pronouncement by Jesus, noting faith.
- 5) Observer reaction of the power to effect change.

White claims that the Zacchaeus pericope does not fit into this pattern. So, for him, Zacchaeus' statement cannot be read as a resolve to future action, but as a defence of his customary generosity and honesty. In his words, "Salvation is announced, neither because of Jesus' power, and his action on behalf of Zacchaeus nor because of Zacchaeus' faith, but because Jesus believes him innocent, i.e. a true son of Abraham despite his job which branded him otherwise" (1979:87).

White's views have been refined and further developed by Fitzmyer (1985b:1218-1227) who argues that it is unnecessary to understand *apodidomi* as a futurist present. According to him, the word is used grammatically in the same way as it is in Luke 18:12, i.e. in the Pharisee's present tense description of his customary practices. He further argues that it is unclear whether or not Zacchaeus was a sinner who repented, as Jesus did not refer to his faith, repentance, conversion or discipleship. The tax collector, he notes, spoke only of regularly sharing his possessions with the poor, and of making fourfold restitution whenever he discovered that he had cheated anybody. For Fitzmeyer, Jesus' finding of a "lost" one should be understood as referring to his defending a just man who is truly a son of Abraham, notwithstanding the fact that he might have lost that status in the eyes of his fellow Jews by virtue of his being a publican.

Johnson (1991:283-288) also seems to agree with the apologia interpretation of the Zacchaeus pericope when he argues that *apodidomi* can be rendered as present progressive to indicate that Zacchaeus

described repeated, customary practice, rather than a single spontaneous act of generosity. He also notes that the verb *esykophantesa* as used in Zacchaeus' conditional sentence does not imply that he committed extortion. This is a departure from his earlier position (1977:145) that Zacchaeus received Jesus into his house and "with a spontaneous gesture of conversion gave half his possessions to the poor and repaid those he has cheated fourfold". However, the following statement suggests that Johnson (1991:287) is yet to make up his mind regarding this matter:

"But he is eager to receive the prophet "with joy" and he declares his willingness to share - indeed if this reading of the story is correct, his regular practice of sharing - his possessions with the poor, not as a single gesture but as a commitment".

### **3.3 Summation**

The arguments presented by the proponents of the apologia interpretation of Zacchaeus' story are quite plausible. To my mind, however, they remain unconvincing. When read critically within the context of the travel narrative in which Jesus comes to seek and call sinners to repentance and to proclaim the salvation of the poor and the oppressed, the Zacchaeus pericope seems best understood according to the traditional interpretation. The fourfold restoration of money extorted inadvertently makes more sense when the extortion is a past event. It is also not likely that Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, was as innocent as the proponents of the apologia interpretation would have us believe. The word "Today" as employed by Jesus is a clear indication to when the turning point in his life came. I shall thus be presenting my position in this paper from the traditional perspective of the story in which Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is understood as culminating in the former's conversion and salvation.

## **4 THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PERICOPE**

Despite his wealth and position, which would normally have earned him respect in his society and culture, Zacchaeus was classified with sinners, the lame, the blind, the prostitutes and the rest of the so-called expendables of society (Neyrey 1986:101,108; 1988:78). In this section, I will examine the reasons for this classification in terms of the honour-shame group-orientated culture of Zacchaeus' times (4.1) and the historical situation in which the Jews known as tax collectors functioned (4.2). I will then extrapolate my findings to the Nigerian situation that this article began with (5) before concluding (6).

#### **4.1 The Honour-Shame group-orientated mediterranean culture of Zacchaeus' times**

The Mediterranean people were group-oriented (Malina 1996:64), group-embedded persons who were “socially minded, attuned to the values, attitudes, and beliefs of their ingroup” (Malina 1989:139). According to Malina (1993b:1), the organising principle of Mediterranean society was “belongingness” (and it has remained so up to the present time). Since the group was so important for the identity of the individual, a person received status from the group (Moxnes 1993:168,172). In other words, a person’s identity depended on belonging to and being accepted by the group. Such belonging and acceptance depended on a person’s adherence to the group’s rules and norms. It was therefore very important for people to know and conform to the traditional standards of their group (Malina, Joubert and Van der Watt 1996:8). Such traditional rules and norms were rooted in the complementary codes of honour and shame.

In the honour-shame culture, a person’s good name was maintained when his group recognised his honour. When a person overstepped the frontiers of the group, he was punished or even expelled from the group. He became an outsider. He was called a fool, sinner or heathen and that was tantamount to a social death sentence. Such a person was believed to be shameless, and a shameless person was a person with a dishonourable reputation beyond all social doubt. He not only lacked concern for his honour, but was also insensitive to the opinion of others (Moxnes 1993:168). He was outside the boundaries of acceptable life. He was therefore a person “who must be denied the normal social courtesies” (Malina 1993a:51). He behaved as an outsider and was treated as such.

It is also worth noting that the world of first-century Palestine was a limited one. Everything was limited in quantity. Land, wealth, labour, health, friendship and love, manliness and honour, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety - everything was scarce and thus limited. In the limited-goods world of Second Testament Palestine, any attempt to amass or accumulate wealth was considered greedy. A person could only increase his wealth at the expense of someone else (Malina 1979:167-168; Esler 1994:35). Thus, traders or merchants, moneylenders (at interest rates) or bankers or financiers, and tax collectors were sinners. They were all the same with thieves in the eyes of the people. They made money at the expense of the people; they forced the people to part with their share of the limited good through extortion and other fraudulent means (Malina 1993a:104).

## **4.2 The historical situation in which Jewish tax-collectors functioned**

Tax collectors were appointees of the imperial Roman administration during the Second Testament. The Jews, as a norm, were resistant to foreign rules. From the perspective of their religious exclusiveness, the Jews disdained association with peoples of other races whom they regarded as Gentiles or unbelievers. Serving a foreign and a suzerain nation as the Roman Empire was not expected of a true Jew. A true Jew was expected to strive for the subversion and overthrow of any colonial regime like the Roman Empire, even if it required leading a revolt. And the Roman authorities were oppressive to the extreme.

Two main forms of taxation were collected from the inhabitants of Palestine - direct and indirect taxation. Direct taxation consisted of land tax and poll tax, both of which were levied on non-Romans. Indirect taxation included custom duties or dues, collected on products like salt, the purchase and manumission of slaves, sales tax, estate duty, mining tax and a host of other levies (Du Toit 1998:26; Perkins 1988:31). The Roman senate contracted Roman businessmen to collect taxes from the subjects. These businessmen in turn employed agents in villages and towns to the same end. Such agents were called publicans (Stambaugh and Balch 1986:77). The tax collectors collected indirect tax but in some cases assisted also in collecting direct tax (Du Toit 1998:26).

In order to make extra money, these tax collectors tended to inflate the amount to be collected. They simply collected more tax than necessary, remitted some to the coffers of the Roman authorities and pocketed the rest (Lachs 1987:44; Malina 1993a:104; Perkins 1988:31; Du Toit 1998:26). The tax collectors were not only agents of oppressive government but were also cruel and inhuman in the bid to extort money. As Jeremias (1969:32) says concerning the activities of the tax collectors in Jerusalem,

“Anyone who succeeded in reaching the market in Jerusalem had to pay duty to the tax-collector to whom the market of Jerusalem had been farmed out... Payment was ruthlessly exacted”.

Thus, by agreeing to serve under an oppressive foreign regime, and a pagan one at that, the Jewish tax collectors overstepped the boundaries of their group and betrayed the Jewish cause. They decided to live as “outsiders”, as outcasts in their own land. They were thus treated as traitors and enemies of the Jewish race. With their cruelty in extorting money from their fellow Jews, the tax collectors further alienated themselves from their community. They did not think of repentance but further aggravated the hatred their people had for them. They were

generally regarded as traitors because they willingly collaborated with the colonial Roman regime, and as robbers because they amassed wealth in a limited-goods society by divesting others of their limited goods.

By their deviant attitude and unbridled love for money, the tax collectors not only separated themselves from their fellow Jews but also from God. Hence, they were classified with sinners and other disreputable, shame-ful people of the Jewish society even though they were materially rich. They were indeed “lost” members of the children of Abraham. They were accorded no public recognition and were thus without honour in the society. Within this milieu, they were categorised with the poor even though they were materially wealthy - a picture reflected in the Second Testament.

Given the above, Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, must have been seen as a chief traitor, chief robber and indeed chief sinner. That was the man that Jesus met at Jericho.

## **5 CHALLENGE FOR NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

The story of Zacchaeus critiques not only the “tax collectors” of our modern times but also the rich among Nigerian Christians. It further critiques the church as the body of Christ that is charged with the responsibility of seeing to the spread of the Gospel “in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8b) as well as every individual Christian.

The mission of Jesus, summarised as seeking and saving that which is lost (19:10), is a responsibility primarily bestowed on the church as the body of Christ, and on every individual Christian as a member of a local church. The tax collector’s conversion challenges the church to reassess her role in the modern world. Is the church in Nigeria still concerned with the salvation of those who are lost? Does the Nigerian church remember to announce divine mercy to those who are estranged from the path of the kingdom of God? Undoubtedly, the church is so preoccupied with other matters that this declared goal of Jesus’ mission, which is indeed the mission of the church, is hardly receiving the necessary attention. Whilst it is true that the modern world poses new challenges that which require new and perhaps “untraditional” approaches, I could not agree more with Hobby’s assertion that “nothing else the church does may take precedence over this mission to seek the lost and to announce divine mercy” (Hobbie 1977:289). The Zacchaeus pericope makes it very clear that the mission of the church is essentially to look after the poor, the outcast, the nobodies, and the expendables of human society. During his ministry, Jesus always associated with these outcasts. He was called names for eating and dinning with sinners: “a

glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:33-35). To my mind, Jesus’ behaviour has to be viewed in light of the eschatological banquet of the blessed in the kingdom of God (14:15). Jesus ate with sinners in anticipation of what God intends to do, that is, to receive sinners at his heavenly table (Martin 1976:374). The church should continue to search for the lost, the sick, the poor, the despised, the outcast and all other people of “lesser importance” for whom Jesus says he comes to the world. Other interests of the church should follow and not precede this principal mission of Jesus as declared in Luke 19:10. This is a responsibility for the church as a body and as individuals. Individual Christians should also shoulder the responsibility of seeking after the lost. We must show interest and concern for the lost; shunning them is far away from the mission of Christ and, of course, of the church.

Most Christian denominations in Nigeria spend the greater part of their time on leadership crises and hardly have enough time for seeking after the lost. Some even make life more difficult for the poor and the needy through burdensome levies and contributions in the name of church development. The physical development of the churches are never matched by the same desire for evangelism or the zeal for welfare programmes that could ameliorate the economic conditions of the poor and the needy. They hardly remember that salvation is not merely a spiritual concern but also has social and political dimensions and necessarily entails deliverance from bodily and social ills as well as the fulfilment of certain concrete worldly desires (Schrage 1988:21). Even the healing ministry of the church in Nigeria which aims at the bodily and social concerns of Christians – the poor as well as the rich – has become a tool for the exploitation of the needy by many a charlatan Christian healer (Olayiwola 1987:49).

The Nigerian Christians have to wake up to the demands and responsibilities of being Christians. They have to be their brothers’ keepers. To be a Christian presupposes some kind of conversion experience, and conversion calls for repentance, a change of course, a new orientation such as experienced by Zacchaeus. To be a Christian demands that we are concerned about others and care for our neighbours. To be a rich Christian calls for a life of sharing not only with the fellow rich but also and especially with the needy (Lk 14–15). Living up to our demands and responsibilities as Christians is not merely advisable but necessary to avoid the judgement of the Last Day (Schrage 1988:41).

The Zacchaeuses of the Nigerian society must realise that their greed for amassing wealth is making life more difficult for the poor and the needy whereas their Christian calling requires them to assist such less-privileged people. Such greed runs contrary to Jesus’ demand for

demonstrating our love for God and our loving kindness towards others. Wealth made at the expense of the poor and the needy is against the spirit of the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. Even clean wealth has to be redistributed in the sense of the rich assisting the poor and the needy, for it is in this way the rich can be furthering the goal of the Gospel before Jesus' Second Coming.

Are the "chief tax collectors" of the Nigerian society ready to shake off their servitude to wealth and earthly possessions and make life meaningful for all their neighbours in order to partake in the eschatological kingdom of God? The story of Zacchaeus challenges all Nigerian Christians, who directly or indirectly contribute to the suffering of the needy through their inordinate pursuits of wealth, to do so.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

Our study of the Zacchaeus pericope reveals that despite Jesus' hard stance against the rich and possessions as presented by Luke the Evangelist, the Gospel is also for the rich. Although it is preferentially meant to be for the poor and the needy, it is also meant for the rich. Jesus accepted the rich Zacchaeus into the new fold of the faithful, and his (Zacchaeus') conversion became a hope for the rich in the salvation that Jesus brought. Just as the poor look up for salvation in this new dispensation, the rich also hope for a place. Zacchaeus is the first-fruit of that hope among the rich. Zacchaeus, by the grace of God through Jesus, was able to attain salvation for himself and his household. Although he attained that on the basis of divine mercy, he nevertheless merited it as he was already in search of Jesus.

However, more importantly, the pericope points to the fact that making proper use of one's wealth is demanded of all Christians. By the demand and responsibility imposed on them by their faith, Christians are supposed to be their brothers' keepers. As such, they need not only share their wealth with the poor, they must also discard inhuman tendencies which seek to amass wealth such that make the poor poorer. Zacchaeus' lust for amassing wealth was nothing but vanity as he eventually came back to redistribute that wealth, which raise him to become a paradigm of how wealthy Christians can judiciously make use of their wealth.

With particular reference to the Nigerian society with its many Zacchaeuses - that is, with people who triumph in amassing wealth, genuine and ill-gotten, at the expense of the poor and the needy - this article calls for the emulation of the biblical Zacchaeus who saw nothing but vanity in the accumulation of wealth. Despite the fact that the Lord did not challenge him, the murmur of the crowd (19:7) elicited a sense of guilt and shame in Zacchaeus, which challenged him and made him resolve to redistribute his wealth. Even though Jesus was already his

guest before this declaration, Zacchaeus resolved to redistribute his wealth amongst the poor and those whom he had defrauded as a result of his conversion, as a form of repentance, and because of his commitment to the Jesus movement. Jesus merely pronounced the confirmation of his conversion that had been in process since he sighted Zacchaeus and called him down from the tree to his guest that night. Nigerian Christians, especially the rich, should not only be seen as Zacchaeus before his conversion but should also be willing to emulate Zacchaeus after his conversion so that the salvation proclaimed for him could also be theirs.

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