

Andrew Richardson

Zacchaeus as the Righteous One

Much has been written regarding Luke's use of the present tense verbs *δίδωμι* and *ἀποδίδωμι* in Luke 19:8. While many scholars to date espouse the view that these verbs operate as "futuristic presents"¹ thus presenting Luke 19:1-10 as a conversion story, there are those who interpret these verbs as "customary presents,"² thus arguing that Zacchaeus is here making a defense of himself against the crowd's accusation that he is a sinner. Does the evidence weigh more heavily toward one of these interpretations? Are there clues to be discovered through a close reading of the text that will lead to a strong argument in favor of one interpretation over the other? Yes.

In this essay, I will argue that Luke 19:1-10 presents the reader with a Zacchaeus who is already acting in accordance with the ethics of the Kingdom of God at the beginning of the pericope, who takes a stand against the crowd's accusation that he is a "sinner" in v. 8, and who is accordingly vindicated by Jesus in vs. 9-10. A close reading of the text will demonstrate strong evidence for this interpretation throughout the entirety of the pericope.

Luke records in v. 1 that Jesus is passing through Jericho, his last stop before arriving in Jerusalem after a lengthy journey (9:51-19:48). This pericope fits the genre of a pronouncement

¹ See, for example, Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 219, Dennis Hamm, "Luke 19:8 Once Again : Does Zacchaeus Defend or Resolve?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 3 (1988): 431-37, I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1st American ed., The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 697-98, Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1956), 435, Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1992), 466, Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 277.

² See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke : Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 1st ed., 2 vols., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 1218-26, Frédéric Louis Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, 5th ed., 2 vols., Clark's Foreign Theological Library. Fourth Series (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957), 217, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 671-72.

story or *chreia*,³ in which 1-8 are the story of a man who is seeking to see Jesus, and vs. 9-10 are the pronouncement by Jesus that Zacchaeus is indeed a child of Abraham and therefore included in the Kingdom of God. The summary of this pronouncement is Jesus' statement that the mission of the Son of Man is to seek and save the lost. The story of Zacchaeus also finds him on a quest⁴ not dissimilar from the quests of the widow in 18:3, the children of 18:15, and blind beggar of 18:35.

The mention of Jericho by name cannot be accidental as it locates this pericope properly within the larger travel narrative and directly after the account of Jesus' encounter with the blind beggar as he approached Jericho (18:35). Moreover, that Zacchaeus is located in the city of Jericho is an important factor in determining whether this pericope should be understood as a conversion story or as a defense, as shall be demonstrated below.

Verse 2 introduces the audience to a rich, Jewish (Zacchaeus is a Jewish name), ruler of toll collectors. Is this man to be understood at this point to be a protagonist or an antagonist? That he is a rich ruler seems to place him (according to Luke's gospel) on the outside of the community of the children of Abraham (1:53; 6:24; 12:21; 14:12; 16:19; 18:18-23). However, within the gospel of Luke, that he is Jewish and a toll collector suggests that regardless of how his immediate community might marginalize him, he is potentially an insider (3:12; 5:27-29; 7:29; 15:1; 18:10-13). Given Luke's consistent placement of toll collectors among the children of Abraham, it is surprising that commentators use Zacchaeus' profession as evidence that he is an

³ James L. Bailey, "Genre Analysis," in *Hearing the New Testament : Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 205.

⁴For a demonstration of this pericope as not only a pronouncement story, but more specifically as a quest story, see Robert C. Tannehill, "The Story of Zacchaeus as Rhetoric : Luke 19:1-10," *Semeia*, no. 64 (1994).

unrepentant sinner!⁵ That Luke has given him a proper name marks his as an extraordinary story in the gospel, and that his name is “Righteous One” (Zakkay)⁶ is further evidence that Luke may want his audience to view Zacchaeus as a child of Abraham from the outset.

Verse 3 goes on to provide further evidence that Zacchaeus is already a participant in righteous living: Zacchaeus is actively seeking (*ζητέω*) to see who Jesus is. His first action in this account is exemplary of every other action taken by Zacchaeus throughout the pericope. He is consistent to a ‘T,’ and does not waver in his persistent following of Jesus. It is in this verse as well that the reader is introduced to a new character with similarly consistent behavior. The crowd in this pericope is the antagonist—the obstacle preventing the faithful seeker from seeing. The crowd does not hold him in high esteem, and would prefer to exclude him from Jesus’ ministry, just as in the case of the little children and the blind beggar in ch. 18. Zacchaeus is prevented from seeing Jesus on account of the crowd because he is *ἡλικία μικρός*. It is difficult to determine what Luke means by this phrase because the word *ἡλικία* is rarely used by him (2:52 regarding maturity and 12:25 regarding life span). Nor is there any other precedent for its use as pertaining to height anywhere else in the New Testament (Matt. 6:27; Eph. 4:13; John 9:21, 23; Heb. 11:11).

While it is unclear whether Zacchaeus is prevented from seeing Jesus due to his small stature, his youth, or his diminutive value in the eyes of the crowd, the conclusion remains that the crowd does not want him near Jesus because he, like the little children of ch. 18, is of small worth. The evidence for this can be found in the statement that, while Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, the Greek syntax makes it clear and unarguable that the primary indication that he could

⁵ See for example: Craddock, *Luke*, 218. Craddock states: “No one can be privately righteous while participating in and profiting from a program that robs and crushes other persons.” Surprisingly, when commenting on John’s instructions to toll collectors in 3:12, Craddock simply refers the reader to his comments on 19:1-10!

⁶ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 696.

not is ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου, on account of the crowd.⁷ This makes sense of the text, especially considering the crowd's response to Jesus' request to meet with Zacchaeus in v. 6 as we shall see.

Zacchaeus is not thwarted by the crowd and runs ahead to climb a tree where he will see Jesus, and more importantly, Jesus will see him and invite him to be a part of his ministry (v. 4-6). Once again we notice that Zacchaeus' actions are consistent: regardless of his dignity, he goes to extreme measures to see Jesus.⁸ Jesus already knows (or knows of) Zacchaeus as is demonstrated in Jesus' calling him by name, and he may even know that Zacchaeus is a child of Abraham. The evidence for this lies in Jesus' use of the divine imperative δεῖ,⁹ which suggests that Jesus is prepared for the events which are about to unfold.

How does Zacchaeus respond to Jesus' command that he hurry and come down? We should not be surprised that Zacchaeus acts not like one who has not yet begun to live a life of repentance but rather as one who submits willingly and joyfully to the leader of this movement. In order to highlight this, Luke uses parallel language to describe Zacchaeus' response to Jesus: Jesus says, “σπεύσας κατέβητι,” and Zacchaeus σπεύσας κατέβη. Green notes that “His [Jesus'] instructions to Zacchaeus are met with immediate and exact obedience, and with joy.”¹⁰ Jesus calls up to Zacchaeus, the one whose name means “righteous,” and Zacchaeus responds as one would expect a righteous person to respond.

⁷ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke : Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 1223. “The prep. *apo* is used in a causal sense (as in 21:26; 22:45b; 24:21; Acts 11:19; 12:14; 22:11).”

⁸ Stein, *Luke*, 467. Stein writes, “Such undignified behavior, according to that culture, indicates that more than curiosity was at play here.”

⁹ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 697. “Behind Jesus' summons lies a necessity imposed on him by God (δεῖ); the implication is that a divine plan is being worked out.”

¹⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 670.

The antagonistic crowd reenters the scene in v. 7 with not only a grumbling accusation that Zacchaeus is a sinner, but also with an implication that Jesus is at best a poor judge of character and at worst sinner himself.¹¹ The tension between the people who are grumbling (*διαγογγύζω*¹²) and Jesus because of his fellowship with Zacchaeus recapitulates the grumbling of the Pharisees in 15:2 at the drawing near of the toll collectors and sinners to Jesus.¹³ If at least some in the crowd were present at any of the previous encounters Jesus had with toll collectors throughout this gospel, they were either not paying attention to those previous outcomes, or they were suspicious of Jesus' position regarding this class of people.

Were this pericope a conversion story, one would expect Luke to record Zacchaeus undergoing some kind of transformation¹⁴ in the course of this narrative. Moreover, one would expect Jesus to confront him with his sin, or to explain to him how to become a true son of Abraham.¹⁵ This is not what happens; in fact, Jesus is not even the one who speaks after the grumbling. Surprisingly, Zacchaeus is the one who stands, or stands up to¹⁶ the crowd and speaks. Because of Luke's use of the present tense verbs *δίδωμι* and *ἀποδίδωμι* in v. 8, Zacchaeus' speech can be interpreted either as "Look, Lord, I'm giving half my goods to the

¹¹ It seems that the logic of the crowd's statement can go two ways: 1) "Pure people do not knowingly dine with sinners, Jesus is pure, therefore Jesus does not know that he is dining with a sinner," or 2) "Pure people do not dine with sinners, Jesus is dining with a sinner, therefore Jesus is not pure." Either way, this is a strong indictment of Jesus' character by those who assume they are on the inside.

¹² It is noteworthy that the only two occurrences of this verb in Luke are found here in our pericope and in 15:2, which is also dealing with Jesus' interaction with toll collectors. Not only that, but the two occurrences share the exact form: 3rd person-plural-aorist-indicative. Such a semantic continuity would surely call to mind Luke's account just a few chapters prior.

¹³ Here in 15:2 we see further evidence that to be a toll collector does not logically necessitate that one be a sinner as they are distinguished from one another.

¹⁴ E.g. 15:17 says of the lost son, *εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἔλθων*... Moreover, there is no suggestion from the text of repentance on the part of Zacchaeus (i.e. no mention of *μετανοέω* in this pericope).

¹⁵ E.g. 3:8 records John the Baptizer doing this: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

¹⁶ Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 482-83. Possible interpretations of *σταθείς* according to BDAG include "stand firm so as to remain stable, stand firm, hold one's ground."

poor and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I'm restoring it fourfold,"¹⁷ or as "My customary practice is to give half of what I have to the poor, etc."¹⁸

Here it is important to note that Jesus has not at this point (as far as Luke has divulged) told Zacchaeus anything regarding the ethics of the Kingdom of God, and yet Zacchaeus demonstrates inside knowledge of the message of both John the Baptist and Jesus himself. It is at this point that the location of Jericho becomes important again. Three years prior to this account and just nine kilometers away, John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3), and Luke records John saying, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:8).

John goes on to explain what the "fruits worthy of repentance" are: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (3:11). In other words, John is telling the people who have possessions that their lifestyle should be such that they give half of what they have to the poor. Is this not precisely what Zacchaeus has told Jesus that he presently does? This suggests that Zacchaeus may have been present for the preaching and baptizing ministry of John. This case is strengthened by the point that Luke records: "Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you'" (3:12-13). With the proximity of John's ministry to Jericho and Zacchaeus' language following closely the message

¹⁷ Hamm, "Luke 19:8 Once Again : Does Zacchaeus Defend or Resolve?," 431-32. Hamm here argues that "to understand Zacchaeus as speaking v. 6 in defense of his customary behavior is to turn him into a boaster rather than a joyful penitent" (435). He borrows this argument from Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 435. This does not seem to be a valid argument, but rather a false dilemma. One can easily go between the horns of this argument by asking: Must all public declaration to Jesus of one's good deeds be considered boasting? Or to put it negatively, is there never an appropriate setting to publically declare one's good deeds? Is it therefore wrong to defend oneself against public slanderous attacks on one's character? To answer this last question in the affirmative is to go well beyond the text.

¹⁸ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 671-72.

of repentance which John preached, there is strong evidence that either Zacchaeus or some of his associates were present, and possibly even baptized in ch. 3. Zacchaeus' declaration of almsgiving as well suggests that he may be familiar with Jesus' own teaching as well (12:32-33).

Jesus' response to Zacchaeus in v. 9 functions as a vindication of Zacchaeus: the crowd has treated him as an outcast and accused him of being a sinner, and Zacchaeus has presented evidence to the contrary, and Jesus has sided with Zacchaeus. There is a temptation to read the word for salvation used here (*σωτηρία*) through a contemporary soteriological lense, but when read through Lucan eyes, Jesus is, as Tannehill points out, "reinstating Zacchaeus as a Jew and is bringing him the salvation promised by God to the Jews."¹⁹ Jesus gives the reason for salvation having come to Zacchaeus' house: "Because he too is a son of Abraham." It is noteworthy that Jesus does not say "He has become a son of Abraham." If this were a conversion story, it would be the case that just as salvation had come that day to Zacchaeus' house; one would expect that he too *that day* would have become a child of Abraham. After all, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:8). Tannehill is helpful in providing the missing premise from the enthymeme found in v. 9: "God has promised salvation to the children of Abraham, Zacchaeus is a child of Abraham, therefore, God has promised salvation to Zacchaeus (and this promise has now been fulfilled through Jesus)." Note that the fact that the promise has now been fulfilled does not mean that Zacchaeus has just become a child of Abraham, rather the public announcement that Zacchaeus is a child of Abraham brings salvation to him since he must now be included in the family of God.²⁰

¹⁹ Tannehill, *Luke*, 278. While Tannehill disagrees with the defense argument for which I am contending here, his interpretation of *σωτηρία* comports well with this interpretation. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 673, gives a similar interpretation of "salvation" in verse 9: "'Salvation' thus refers to restoration to the community of God's people."

²⁰ ———, "The Story of Zacchaeus as Rhetoric : Luke 19:1-10," 209.

Jesus' final pronouncement that "the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (v. 10) reinforces Jesus' statements regarding his mission at the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth when he reads from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Ironically, the poor, blind (because of the crowd), and oppressed captive in this pericope is a rich, Jewish ruler.²¹ Jesus' mention of the 'lost' (*ἀπόλλυμι*) draws Luke's audience back to ch. 15 where Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Just as our present pericope contains no language of repentance; neither do the first two examples of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Moreover, neither the sheep nor the coin did anything to get lost; rather the shepherd and the woman are the ones who do the losing. This is not to implicate God in the losing, but rather to point out that the Kingdom of God is about bringing the marginalized into the community.

This brief essay has demonstrated that Luke 19:1-10 presents the reader with a Zacchaeus who is already acting in accordance with the ethics of the Kingdom of God at the beginning of the pericope, who takes a stand against the crowd's accusation that he is a "sinner" in v. 8, and who is therefore vindicated by Jesus in vs. 9-10. Not only has a close reading of the text shown that evidence in favor of interpreting the present tense verbs *δίδωμι* and *ἀποδίδωμι* in v.8 as "customary presents," pervades the pericope, but it has also revealed that the co-text around this verse undermines a "futuristic present" interpretation.

²¹ Paul Hertig, "The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke : Reversals of Fortunes," *Missiology* 26, no. 2 (1998): 175. Hertig notes that "By labeling Zacchaeus as one of the 'lost' who had been found, Jesus places Zacchaeus in the category of the *ptochoi*..."

Luke's description of Zacchaeus' name, location, ethnicity, position, status, stature, actions, and speech all argue for a reading of this pericope which sees Zacchaeus as a righteous man who has been excluded by his community from the family of Abraham, but who reveals himself to be a child of Abraham, resulting in the coming of salvation to his house.

Bibliography

- Bailey, James L. "Genre Analysis." In *Hearing the New Testament : Strategies for Interpretation*, edited by Joel B. Green, xvi, 444 p. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995.
- Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.
- Danker, Frederick W., and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Gospel According to Luke : Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. 1st ed. 2 vols, The Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981.
- Godet, Frédéric Louis. *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*. 5th ed. 2 vols, Clark's Foreign Theological Library. Fourth Series. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957.
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997.
- Hamm, Dennis. "Luke 19:8 Once Again : Does Zacchaeus Defend or Resolve?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 3 (1988): 431-37.
- Hertig, Paul. "The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke : Reversals of Fortunes." *Missiology* 26, no. 2 (1998): 167-79.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text*. 1st American ed, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.
- Plummer, Alfred. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*. 5th ed. Edinburgh: Clark, 1956.
- Stein, Robert H. *Luke*, New American Commentary. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1992.
- Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- . "The Story of Zacchaeus as Rhetoric : Luke 19:1-10." *Semeia*, no. 64 (1994): 201-21.