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Who Cares That it Was a  
  
 Climbing Trees and Playing on Words in Luke 19:1-10  
 By Lee Magness

Most recent scholarly attention on the Zacchaeus narrative, Luke 19:1–10, has focused on verse eight: “Behold half my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor, and if I extorted anything from anyone I repay fourfold.” The debate is whether Zacchaeus is defending himself or repenting; describing his customary behavior or making a resolve for the future. The question is just as important for all students of the Gospel of Luke. Can we use this story as a model of repentance and salvation, or not? The alternative—a story vindicating Zacchaeus’ virtue—is very appealing. There is something attractive about a conversion in which we are only challenged to describe or defend our already virtuous behavior. Do not pass repentance; go directly to redemption; collect salvation.

But there are several factors in this text that point to true repentance on the part of the tax collector. And if so, we have one more reason to take repentance (more) seriously in the process of salvation. One of those factors is the significance of the sycamore tree in verse four. The question is, Who cares that it was a sycamore?

It was not a sycamore, of course. Sycamore is but an unfortunate transliteration camouflaging “fig tree.” But who cares that it was a fig tree? From one perspective, we should not be at all surprised that Luke specifies a fig tree. Economically, fig production pervaded Mediterranean agricultural life. There were over sixty Greek words related to figs, fig trees, and fig cultivation.<sup>1</sup>

But from another perspective, the mention of the type of tree into which the diminutive publican climbed seems little more than an insignificant botanical cipher. Commentators are almost universally content to discuss such mundane matters as how the Egyptian fig tree differed from the European or American sycamore; how the fig tree is related to the mulberry; whether or not the sycamore was the same as the sycamine of Luke 17:6; whether or not the fig tree grew along roadsides; how its fruit, although edible, was only eaten by the poor; and, most often, how its sturdy trunk and low-spreading branches made it amenable to climbing. Hence its role in our story. But to what end? Who cares that it was a fig tree?

Some commentators see the mention of the fig tree as a mere “anecdotal detail.” One century-old commentary ventured an explanation for its presence: “St. Luke who is generally indifferent to geographical details, thus preserves the local colouring.”<sup>2</sup> But these assessments merely reframe the question, or raise it with new urgency. Why would Luke, contrary to his own custom, include a botanical trivium at this point? If it is local color, why suddenly and uncharacteristically resort to this device? Wouldn’t it have been enough to know that he climbed a tree?<sup>3</sup>

A reading of the Greek text of this narrative reveals that the tree Zacchaeus climbed (*sukomorea*) shares a lexical root with what he confessed to be, a *sukophantes* (defrauder or extortioner). The possibility of an intentional



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play on words has been entertained before, but not widely or seriously. According to Vincent, “it is an odd coincidence, nothing more, that the fig-mulberry (sycamore) should occur in connection with the fig-shower (sycophant).”<sup>4</sup> But I disagree, for two reasons. First, Luke’s other references to figs are neither meaningless ciphers nor mere local color. They are thematically significant and integral to his theological and ethical agenda. Second, the connection between fig trees and extortioners is not coincidental in Greek literature. A play on words based on these terms appears at least four other times.

First, there is the significance of Luke’s own use of figs and fig trees. Luke 6:43–45 records Jesus’ teaching on trees and fruit: “for they do not gather figs from thorn bushes.” The point is that “a bad tree does not produce good fruit,” or, to put it more positively, “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good fruit.” The fig signifies the good spiritual fruit that we expect to come from a good tree. Elsewhere, the parable in Luke 13:6–9 has a farmer planting a fig tree, coming to pick figs, and finding none. Once again the fig tree symbolizes spiritual fruitfulness, coming as it does in the context of a call to repentance (13:1–5). Finally, Luke 21:29–31 records the saying, “Behold the fig tree and all the trees, whenever they are already putting forth leaves, you see for yourselves and know that summer is near.” Fig leaves symbolize the eschatological signs that “your redemption is drawing near” (21:28). In each case, Luke’s use of figs and fig trees is highly and specifically symbolic of *fruitfulness*, precisely in the context of *repentance* and in the light of *salvation*, justifying our expectation of a symbolic function for the fig tree into which Zacchaeus climbed.

The wordplay fig tree (*sukomorea*) / extortioner (*sukophantes*) adds yet another layer of signification. The verb meaning “to cheat, to extort, to defraud” (literally, to show figs) may derive from the practice of collecting figs as public revenue in ancient Athens.<sup>5</sup> Lysias of Athens sup-

plies an illustration of its use: “. . . from the prisoners of war whose loss he himself had caused, he extracted a bribe (*esukophantesen*) of 30 minae, by declaring that he would not obtain their release unless they supplied him with this sum from their own pockets” (26.24). The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, employs the terms in much the same way with some added emphasis on the general concept of oppression. Take, for example, Proverbs 28:16: “The king who lacks revenue [from taxes] is a great oppressor (*sukophantes*).” The only appearances of the terms in the New Testament are in Luke—in our passage and earlier in Luke 3:14, where John the Baptizer orders soldiers not to defraud the people. The double blade of economic extortion and political oppression would have been wielded whenever soldiers received kickbacks for forcing people to pay exorbitant taxes to fraudulent publicans.

The concepts involved in this “defraud” word family are clear and consistent. The offense was not only commonly referred to in Greek literature, including the Septuagint, it was clearly a concern of Luke’s as well. But is there a play on words? Is “fig tree” of verse four actually highlighting “I defrauded” in verse eight? Several instances in Greek literature support the likelihood. In Aristophanes’ *The Plutus*, a character named Sycophant is suddenly robbed of his ill-gotten wealth. As the defrauder is stripped—cloak, shoes, and all—the main character, Karion, calls to another character, “Give me your old cloak so I might wrap this defrauder (*sukophanten*) in it” (935–36). To this, Sycophant replies, “If I should get some comrade, even a fig-wood comrade (*sukinon*), I would bring this strong God to justice” (945–47). In *The Birds*, Aristophanes writes of a foreign nation, “[W]ith its tongue it sows and reaps and gathers . . . figs, . . . foreign sycophants who flock to Athens and earn their living with their tongues” (1699). Other examples of the play on words appear in the Scholiast of line 873 of *The Plutus* and in Cratinus, Fragment 69.

I am convinced that we have the same phenomenon in Luke 19. An otherwise inexplicable feature, a detail in a text that avoids such details, an apparent coincidence using words that Luke does not use coincidentally begins to make sense as a pointer by means of a play on words. The point is not where Zacchaeus was but what he was, and what he was was highlighted by where he was.

While exploring the background of “defraud(er)” in the Septuagint, I came upon another play on words that



offers added insight. As noted above, Luke seems especially sensitive to the Septuagint's use of the term to mean oppression, broader than but not disconnected from the connotations of extortion and fraud. What I began to notice was that time and again words of this "defraud" family appear as antonyms of the word family related to "righteous." In Leviticus 19:11–13, the command not to defraud one's neighbor is reworded as "do not deal unrighteously with your neighbor." In Amos 2:6–8, the unrighteous who "sell the righteous for a pair of shoes" are those who "drink the wine of oppression." Psalm 119:121–22 (LXX 118:121–22) says, "I have done what is just and right; . . . let not the godless oppress me." Or take this passage from Proverbs 14:31–32: "The one who oppresses a poor man provokes the one who made him, . . . but the one who trusts in his holiness is righteous." In fact, of the fifteen appearances of the "defraud" family in the Septuagint, ten appear in contexts where the "righteous" family are the direct antonyms (Leviticus 19:11–13; Amos 2:6–8; Job 35:7–8; Psalms 119:121–22; 119:134–38; 72:1–4; Proverbs 14:31–32; 28:1–3; 28:16; Ecclesiastes 5:8).

The reason that this correlation is of interest to us is that the name Zacchaeus means "righteous." Commentaries are fond of pointing out the meaning of the name and even the incongruity of this extortioner named "Righteous." But most tend to reject any significance in the correlation. There are reasons, however, for taking it seriously. There is the Septuagint's connection of oppression and righteousness, there is the unusual appearance of a proper name at all, and there is a curious construction in 19:2 that signals added significance for that name.

Luke appears to place special emphasis on the name Zacchaeus by means of the emphatic repetition with which he introduces it: "by name, being called."<sup>6</sup> The designation "by name" appears twenty-seven times in Luke-Acts; some form of "being called" appears nine times. Only in 19:2 does Luke combine these two common idioms, creating a deliberate redundancy that calls attention to the name and, I suggest, to the meaning of the name.

It is possible, then, that by a second play on words Luke directs our thoughts not only from fig tree to oppressor but also from oppressor to righteous one. It is possible that where Zacchaeus was (in the fig tree) points to what Zacchaeus was (an oppressive defrauder), and that what Zacchaeus was points to what he has been called to be (the righteous one).<sup>7</sup>

Thus this passage bears a cluster of interrelated ideas reinforced by multiple wordplays: first, the sound of the

Greek word for "fig tree" pointing to "defrauder"; second, the Old Testament concept of fraud/oppression calling attention to its antonym "righteous"; and third, "righteous" in turn being the meaning of Zacchaeus' name. That such a cluster should occur in Luke is neither surprising nor

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insignificant. The triad of concepts created by this double play on words weaves together three prominent strands of Lukan thought.

First, in the symbolic use of the fig tree we see the culmination of the theme of fruitfulness. The fig is a good fruit from a good tree (6:43–45), and so now is Zacchaeus, contrary to the erroneous evaluation of the blind guides who see him only and ever as "sinner." The fig tree must not be fruitless when the farmer comes to seek and to pick the fruit of repentance (13:6–9); Zacchaeus clings to a fig tree, plucked by the One who came to seek and to save one ripe for repentance. When the fig tree leafs out, redemption is drawing near (21:29–31); for Zacchaeus, salvation would come to his house that day.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the wordplay between fig tree and extortioner reminds us of Luke's warnings against wealth and oppression. Zacchaeus was everything that the prophet John had warned against (3:11–14). He was the rich man with multiple tunics and plenty of food who needed to share with those in need. He was the tax collector who must cease collecting more than required. And he was, like the soldiers, an extortioner who must not oppress the poor. But Zacchaeus had also become, through contact with the Christ, everything John had called the people to be: a true child of Abraham, not raised up from the stones, but in this case plucked from a fig tree.

Third, in the interplay between oppression and the name Zacchaeus, we see the theme of righteousness, which in Luke is frequently contrasted precisely with the unrighteousness of tax collectors. In a large crowd of tax collectors, Jesus pronounced that he had not come to call those who were righteous in their own eyes, but sinners to repentance (5:29–32). In Luke 7:29, "All the people, even tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, recognized



God's righteousness." In the company of tax collectors, Jesus climaxed his sheep's tale by saying, "There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (15:1-7). And it was to those "confident of their own righteousness" that Jesus told the story of the repentant tax collector who, like Zacchaeus, went home righteous before God (ch 18).

Who cares that it was a sycamore—or that his name was Zacchaeus, for that matter? I'd say the author of the third gospel did, and with good reason. The story of Zacchaeus provided him with a pattern of salvation in which an unrighteous person responded to a confrontation with the person and proclamation of Jesus with genuine (active) repentance. It is the same for us. The text offers us the opportunity to preach confidently the necessity of repentance in the call to conversion; to teach people that there is a difference between who they are and who they are meant to be, between the lifestyles of the unrighteous and fraudulent and those of the redeemed. And the story serves as a reminder to all of us that repentance and righteousness are related as much to the way we treat the lowly as to the way we trust in the Lord.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1843, 1940), 1670-71. There is the fig tree itself (*suke*, *sukaminos*, *sukomoros*, and *sukomorea*). There is the fruit (*sukon*, etc.). Then there are the verbs meaning "to gather figs," the adjectives meaning "having to do with figs," and an odd assortment of derivatives including "fig-yard," "fig-plucker," and "fig-sandaled."

<sup>2</sup>W. B. Jones, *St. Luke's Gospel*, The Bible Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887).

<sup>3</sup>Someone might well suggest that Luke received this account whole from the tradition. But since the account is unique to Luke, it is difficult if not dangerous to delineate between tradition and Luke's own contribution here. Besides, the account is so thoroughly consistent with Luke's themes that we can, I think, assume the highest degree of the author's influence.

<sup>4</sup>Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1887), 1:409.

<sup>5</sup>Liddell and Scott, 1671.

<sup>6</sup>Marshall (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978]) has recently admitted to the potential significance of this "deliberately pleonastic" construction. O'Hanlon (John O'Hanlon, "The Story of Zacchaeus and the Lukan Ethic," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 12:2-26) calls it "odd and unique." Some commentators see it as an insignificant Hebraism. But the question remains: Why employ even an insignificant Hebraism only here, if not to draw special attention to this particular name?

<sup>7</sup>I am not suggesting that Luke intends to play off the meanings of all the proper names he records. But it is hard to imagine, for example, that he would have missed the significance of "God is my help," the meaning of Lazarus in the only parable with a named character.

<sup>8</sup>Interestingly enough, the most famous fig tree passage in the Gospels, the cursing and withering of the fig tree, is not recorded in Luke. The Zacchaeus account may in fact replace it as Luke's climactic connection between figs and spiritual fruitbearing—a narrative substituted for a parable.