

Sermon Notes; September 20, 2020 **Focus:** Matthew and Money [Lectionary Readings](#)

If you put yourself in the shoes of a Jewish person in the first century, making a living is hard. Many people weren't educated or socially connected enough to get anything above subsistence. But if you were like Matthew, you were smart and found a way to thrive (sort of).

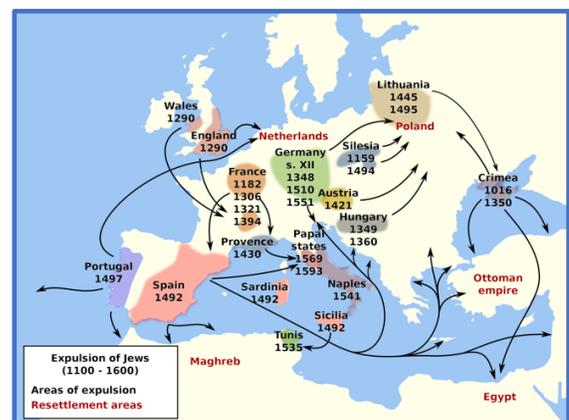
The why of tax collecting in the Roman period: Entrepreneurial types would get into tax collecting because they could stand to make more money than as a fisherman. The tax man is always hated, but these tax collecting Jews really sold out their neighbors. Despite our pious beliefs about ourselves, many of us would jump at the chance to be a tax collector if we lived in the New Testament period - and we would be grateful for the opportunity. Tax collectors were a mix of the IRS and the protection racket of the Mafia.

“Tax farming” in the Roman period that created Jewish tax collector Rome did not want to bother with the tedious administration of collecting taxes, so they found motivated people to do the work for them. A hypothetical Roman official would assess a Jewish village as owing \$10,000. The official would let someone “buy” these taxes, let's say it was Matthew. Viola – Matthew would assume the burden of collecting the money, and he became a tax collector. As long as Matthew paid back the \$10,000, he could squeeze the people for as much as he could get away with. Let's say Matthew gets \$15,000. He can keep \$5000. You can imagine that this was a good business model for those who did not mind walking on their neighbors. Pitting neighbor against neighbor is as old a time.

Antisemitism, 1290, and today Do you know why people sometimes joke that Jews are good with money? First, it's straight up anti-Semitism, but it is also deeply rooted in Medieval history. Before and after the Edict of Expulsion (1290 BCE) Jews were redlined out of property rights and access to the respectable economy. The only jobs left to them were largely money lending (diamonds too but that's another variation on the theme but not for today). Expulsion's precursor was the Edict of the Badge (1218 BCE) where Jews had to wear a badge marking them as Jews.

In England, Jews were not regular citizens, they were governed solely by the whims of the king who could make their lives better or worse.

European Christians were creating economic systems that funneled Jewish people into undesirable positions. Christians piously excluded themselves from practicing “usury” aka money lending – enter Jewish people. If you have ever joked about Jewish people and money, you have been oblivious or willfully ignorant of the historical, structural racism informing this garbage. This structural inequality really kicked into high gear in 1290 with the Edict of Expulsion that forced English Jews onto a pogrom.



Structural racism is a live discussion today. America has created an economic system that divests certain people and the dominant society tells them to work harder and/or be less threatening. With hundreds of years of being shut out of the market, some of the results today should be no surprise. Blame either way tends to hide the architecture of what creates inequality in the first place. Historical clarity and contemporary engagement can begin to clear the fog.

Medieval Judaism Like I said a moment ago, Christians locked Jews out of the respectable financial systems and then judged them for being miserly and greedy. The Merchant of Venice paints this picture vividly. English anti-Semitism was on full display in Shakespeare's time:

From Wikipedia Merchant of Venice's character Shylock (Jewish Money Lender): Shylock is a Jew who lends money to his Christian rival Antonio, setting the security at a pound of Antonio's flesh. When a bankrupt Antonio defaults on the loan, Shylock demands the pound of flesh. This decision is fueled by his sense of revenge, for Antonio had previously insulted, physically assaulted and spat on Shylock in the stock exchange of Venice dozens of times, Antonio defiled the "sacred" Jewish religion and had also inflicted massive financial losses on Shylock.

Meanwhile, Shylock's daughter, Jessica, falls in love with Antonio's friend Lorenzo and converts to Christianity. They leave Shylock's house and steal vast riches from him, which adds to Shylock's rage and harden his resolve for revenge. In the end – due to the efforts of Antonio's well-wisher, Portia – Shylock is charged with attempted murder of a Christian, carrying a possible death penalty, and Antonio is freed without punishment.

Shylock is then ordered to surrender half of his wealth and property to the state and the other half to Antonio. However, as an act of "mercy", Antonio modifies the verdict, asking Shylock to hand over only one-half of his wealth – to him (Antonio) for his own as well as Lorenzo's need

Historical background In Shakespeare's time, no Jews had been legally present in England for several hundred years (since the Edict of Expulsion in 1290). However, stereotypes of Jews as money lenders remained from the Middle Ages. Historically, money lending had been a fairly common occupation among Jews, in part because Christians were not permitted to practice usury, then considered to mean charging interest of any kind on loans, and Jews were excluded from other fields of work. At the same time, most Christian kings forbade Jews to own land for farming or to serve in the government, and craft guilds usually refused to admit Jews as artisans. Thus, money lending was one of the few occupations still open to Jews.

I hope you found this interesting. See if your thoughts about and actions toward people are medieval.

Know your history, clear the fog, and love your neighbor.

Todd