

What Is Caesar's to Caesar: The Meaning of Matthew 22:15-22 in Historical and Biblical Context

Translation

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and took council so that they might trap him in a word. ¹⁶They sent their disciples to him with the Herodians, saying "Teacher, we have known that you are truthful, you teach the way of God in truth, and you are not concerned about what anyone thinks, for you do not look into the face of men. ¹⁷So tell us, what do you think? Is it right to give the tax to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "Why are you testing me, hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin for the tax." They brought him a denarius, and ²⁰he said to them, "Whose image and inscription is on it?"

²¹They said to him, "Caesar."

Then he said to them, "Then give back what is Caesar's to Caesar, and what is God's to God."

²²When they heard this, they were amazed. They left him and departed.

Introduction

The separation between the sacred and the secular, between church and state, is a hallmark of modern Western society and a truism that many people today often simply assume. But the Gospel of Matthew's audience would not have considered such a separation to be so obviously beneficial or even intelligible. Keeping in mind the differences of historical context, many recent interpreters of the Synoptic Gospels have opted to "cut through the modern assumption about the separation of religion from political-economic affairs," interpreting the above passage much more radically than it has been traditionally. ¹ *In this paper, I will attempt to analyze Matthew 22:15-22 in its historical and biblical context in order to discern Jesus' cryptic response regarding God and Caesar.* In doing so, I hope to avoid both forcing modern political presumptions onto the text and ruling out the possibility of any similarities *a priori*.

The passage has three major interpretive lines among contemporary scholars: 1) The references to God and Caesar denote "spheres of given relationship and responsibility."² Jesus is instructing His followers to honor God and Caesar in their appropriate spheres, with ultimate loyalty belonging to God alone, in a way at least vaguely similar to modern Western politics. 2) Jesus is openly calling for revolution, albeit in a coded form that would only be recognized by pious Jews.³ Jesus thus tells his listeners to refuse to pay the tax and so resist the Roman Empire, but in a way that keeps the Herodians oblivious to what is really going on. 3) Jesus is purposefully ambiguous in His response. Those favoring this line of interpretation differ over the exact purpose of the ambiguity. To give one example, N. T. Wright sees the ambiguity "as a further cryptic, riddling challenge to follow him in the real revolution," an ambiguity which would have simultaneously challenged the Roman Empire, Jewish compromisers, and even the nationalistic revolutionaries.⁴ In dialogue with these three major lines of interpretation, the rest of the paper will examine this passage by first analyzing two key background issues, the imperial tax and the coin, before offering an interpretation of the passage.

Exegesis of 22:15-22

The Imperial Tax

Central to this passage is the nature of Roman taxation, specifically the *khnsoß*, or head tax. The head tax was conjoined with the census, and consisted of one denarius for every adult.⁵ The local Jewish leadership collected the tax, and many Jews resented the collectors for what they saw as treason: colluding with the Roman oppressors.⁶ Indeed the taxation itself became a “painful symbol of conquest,” as Jews saw the tax as supporting both a distant, pagan ruler and the very soldiers occupying their cities.⁷

Rome imposed the head tax on Judea in AD 6 when they implemented direct rule over the province. Jews met the tax with immediate resistance, and a Galilean named Judas led a revolt that, although short-lived and unsuccessful, lingered in Jewish consciousness and partly inspired the Zealot movement.⁸ In addition, only a generation later in AD 70, Judea will revolt, and taxes will be a major contributing factor.⁹ Taxation was a heated topic with many revolutionary undertones to say the least. The question the Pharisees pose to Jesus is therefore historically loaded. It is not improbable that most of the audience would have Judas the Galilean on the forefront of their minds, wondering if, and possibly hoping that, this other Galilean, Jesus, will act similarly.

The Coin

One contributing factor to Jewish resentment towards the head tax was the coin itself. In violation of Exodus 20:4, “You shall not make for yourself an image,” the denarius used for the tax bore an image of Caesar. As N. T. Wright notes, even Herod Antipas refrained from placing his image on the coins he minted, as insensitive as he otherwise was to the concerns of traditional Jewish piety.¹⁰ In addition, the inscription on the coin violated Exodus 20:3, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The inscription on one side of the coin referred to Caesar as “son of a god,” in latin literally “Ti[berius] Caesar Divi Aug[usti] F[ilius] Augustus.” The other side read “Pontif[ex] Maxim[us],” or high priest.¹¹ One would be hard pressed to think of an inscription that would be more offensive to Jewish sensibilities, aside from using the very name of God. Because of this offense, however, Rome had allowed bronze coins to be minted for everyday use in Judea.¹² The Pharisees would then have no need to have such a coin handy, let alone bring such an idolatrous coin into the Temple area, where the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees took place. The significance of the idolatrous coin will be further expounded in the context of the passage below.

The Trap (v. 15-17)

The passage begins with the Pharisees laying plans to “trap” (*pagideuswin*, purpose subjunctive) Jesus. Jesus’ response, as well as the crowd’s amazement at His response, will only make sense if the nature of the trap is understood. The word *pagideuw* is often used in the context of hunting, and means to “set a snare, or trap, entrap.”¹³ By putting the question “Is it right to give the tax to Caesar or not?” (v. 17) to Jesus, the Pharisees believe they will be setting a snare for Jesus from which He will not be able to get out. This pericope fits well, then, within the building tension of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees throughout Matthew’s

gospel. The Pharisees increasingly see Jesus as a dangerous threat, and take more and more drastic measures to put a stop to Him.

The trap itself seems to be a question that calls for a simple “yes” or “no” as an answer, but that puts Jesus in a bind with either response. First, as R. T. France states, a negative response would lead the Pharisees to denounce Jesus to Rome.¹⁴ The possibility of Jesus saying it is not lawful explains the presence of the Herodians, partisans of the Herodian dynasty.¹⁵ Considering that Judea was no longer under Herod’s rule and that the Pharisees were antithetical to Herod’s regime, their presence is otherwise very peculiar. The Pharisees, who H. W. Hoehner rightly describes as “anti-Herodian and anti-Roman,”¹⁶ would need other people present to arrest Jesus to keep the crowd from seeing their obvious hypocrisy in serving Roman interests by arresting Jesus.

Second, a positive answer expressing support for paying the tax to Rome would likely alienate Jesus from the crowd. The Jewish leaders have been hesitant to act against Jesus other than through argument because of the popular support He has enjoyed.¹⁷ But if Jesus loses that popular support, He would either be ignored as a coward or be vulnerable to potential actions against Him from the leadership in Jerusalem. This incident follows the Temple cleansing (21:12ff.), an act with strong symbolic overtones challenging the Jewish leadership’s authority. The leadership would then have been looking for a way to silence Jesus without making themselves vulnerable.

Several interpreters see the flattery of v. 16 as revealing that the Pharisees expected a negative response, an open call for revolution. For example, John Howard Yoder sees the Pharisees as acting in way that only makes sense if they “expected [Him] to give an answer which would enable them to denounce Him.”¹⁸ Although one should not completely collapse the double-edged nature of the trap, Matthew surely emphasizes the expectation of a negative response over a positive one, an emphasis even more clear in Luke’s account (20:20). First, Matthew mentions the Herodians but never explicitly refers to a surrounding crowd in the passage. Indeed, commentators are filling in the gaps when they include a negative public reaction as part of the potential trap. Second, the Pharisees saw the tax and coins as morally reprehensible as explained above, so their prefacing the question with “you teach the way of God in truth,” seems to implicitly draw attention to the moral offense pious Jews felt towards the tax of the pagan oppressors. Indeed, Myers seems right to see this flattery as the Pharisees “daring” Jesus to give the revolutionary answer they expected from Him.¹⁹

Give Back (v. 18-21a)

Asked a yes or no question, Jesus responds with neither. He requests that they hand Him the coin. After asking whose image and inscription is on the coin, Jesus famously responds “Give back what is Caesar’s to Caesar, and what is God’s to God” (v. 21). As was stated above, the coin was idolatrous and the Romans had provided other means for Jews to go about normal business. By asking to see the coin, Jesus reveals how the Pharisees have compromised their own values: they had brought an idolatrous coin into the Temple area needlessly.

Jesus then instructs the Pharisees to “give back” (apodote) to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Jesus here uses the imperative form of apodidwmi, which has a distinctly different meaning than didwmi, which as R. T. France points out, is the word used by the Pharisees in their question to

Jesus in v. 17.²⁰ The word *apodidwmi* has two central, interrelated meanings in both classical Greek and Koine Greek: “to give up or back, to restore, return,” and “to render what is due.”²¹ These two meanings have allowed for two main contemporary interpretations. Some interpreters, perhaps most notably N. T. Wright, have stressed the second meaning of *apodidwmi*, “to render what is due.”²² Wright takes this as a veiled reference to 1 Maccabees 2:68, in which Mattathais instructs his sons to “Pay back the Gentiles in full,” clearly having vengeance in mind. Caesar is then, as Wright’s interpretation goes, to be similarly paid back for oppressing Israel.²³ R. T. France argues against this interpretation, pointing out that the verb used in 1 Maccabees is *antapodidwmi*, not *apodidwmi* as in Matthew.²⁴ The two words are, however, closely enough related that the original spoken Aramaic could easily have been identical. The plausibility of this interpretation hinges on the familiarity of the original audience with the Maccabees, which seems very likely given the annual celebration of Hannukah in Jerusalem. If Wright’s interpretation is correct, the crowd would have heard Jesus’ words as subtly but clearly some sort of revolutionary call.

Other commentators have favored giving *apodidwmi* the meaning “to give back” or “return.”²⁵ Many in this group prefer interpreting Jesus’ words as saying, in the words of Ben Witherington’s gloss, “Give back to Caesar his worthless coins.”²⁶ The immediate context seems to favor this interpretation. Jesus had just asked whose image and inscription is on the coin. Both the image and inscription would imply a certain sense of ownership. The fact that the coins were blasphemous would only heighten the sense of irony that the Pharisees would see getting rid of them as an issue.

What is God’s to God (v. 21b-22)

The most crucial interpretive issue regarding this passage is the relationship of the phrase “Give what is Caesar’s to Caesar” to “and what is God’s to God” (v. 21a and 21b). Any pious Jew would have a profound understanding that the world is the Lord’s, and everything in it (Ps. 24:1, 29:1-2, 96:7-10; 1 Chr 29:14). John Howard Yoder rightly points out that what is considered “God’s” would mean more than just “spiritual things” as is often the case today.²⁷ Rather than referring to separate realms, v. 21a and 21b would denote “demands or prerogatives which somehow overlap or compete, needing to be disentangled.”²⁸ In other words, the relationship between the two phrases would be seen as ambiguous and in need of a specific situational context in order to clarify.

Ched Myers sees v. 21a and 21b as an example of “apocalyptic dualism... inviting one to act towards allegiances, stated clearly as *opposites*.”²⁹ The wider context possibly supports his case: Jesus’ response here is vaguely similar in structure to Jesus’ question to the Pharisees concerning John the Baptist’s authority (21:25 – “Was it from heaven or from men?”) which Myers sees as another example of apocalyptic dualism. Also in chapter 21, as Myers points out, the parable of the vineyard portrays God as the true owner and everyone else as only a tenant.³⁰ Given the additional fact that Jesus consistently acts in a manner that reflects God’s being the true king, no matter who may hold the title on earth, Myers’ case becomes very possible.

Perhaps the key to interpreting the passage then becomes the amazement in v. 22. Myers asserts that “No neat doctrine of ‘obedient citizenship’ could possibly” have sparked such amazement.³¹ Counter to Myers, open confrontation would not have either. As shown above, the Jews were accustomed to would-be revolutionaries from Galilee. On the other hand, Jesus using His characteristic wit to turn the tables on His testers would have, however, captivated His

audience and left the Pharisees speechless. Ben Witherington seems right to interpret the passage as Jesus answering the Pharisees' question with, in effect, another question, "Who is Lord?"³²

Conclusion

Many contemporary interpreters have recently challenged the more traditional interpretation of Jesus' response to the Pharisees as entailing a sort of "Proto-Modern" separation of the spheres of church and state. They have gone too far, however, and replaced a bland call to obedience with an equally bland call for revolution. Jesus' words, however, were shown to leave his hearers speechless. Jesus' response is then aptly summarized by Ben Witherington: "Give back to Caesar his worthless coins, and give to God your whole-hearted and undivided allegiance."³³ Such an ambiguous response would surely have challenged all the presumed responses to Roman rule, making it a "cryptic, riddling challenge to follow him in the real revolution, the real kingdom-movement."³⁴

Bibliography

A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Ed. Ed. Frederick William Danker. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000.

Bock, Darrel L. *Jesus According to the Scriptures: Restoring the Portrait From the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.

France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Hauerwas, Stanley. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006.

Hoehner, H. W. "Herodian Dynasty." *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1992.

Horsley, Richard A. *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

Liddel and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1889.

Myers, Ched. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, 20th Anniversary Ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008.

Schmidt, T. E. "Taxes." *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1992.

Witherington III, Ben. *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1997.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.

Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus, 2nd Ed.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994.

¹ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 98.

² Darrel L. Bock, *Jesus According to the Scriptures: Restoring the Portrait From the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 329. See also the language of "complementary claims" used by R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 834.

³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, 20th Anniversary Ed.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 312. Also Horsley, 98. Both focus on the Gospel of Mark, which they see as earlier and more reliable, but would interpret Matthew's account identically.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 506. Another example of this strain of thought can be found in Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 191.

⁵ France, 832.

⁶ T. E. Schmidt, "Taxes," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1992), 805-806.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ France, 829.

⁹ Myers, 314.

¹⁰ Wright, 503.

¹¹ France, 833.

¹² Ibid., 830.

¹³ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Ed.* (BDAG), ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 747.

¹⁴ France, 829.

¹⁵ BDAG, 440.

¹⁶ H. W. Hoehner, "Herodian Dynasty," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 325.

¹⁷ Myers, 314.

¹⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus, 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 44.

¹⁹ Myers, 311.

²⁰ France, 833.

²¹ Liddel and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, 7th Ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1889), 97. Also, BDAG, 109-110.

²² Wright, 504.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ France, 834.

²⁵ Hauerwas, 190. See also Bock, 329.

²⁶ Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1997), 155. See also France, 830, and Hauerwas, 190.

²⁷ Yoder, 44.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Myers, 312.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Witherington, 155.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wright, 506.