Tyndale Bulletin 71.2 (2020) 191-206

‘SHOW ME THE MONEY’
JESUS, VISUAL AIDS, AND THE TRIBUTE QUESTION

N. Clayton Croy
(nclaytoncroy@gmail.com)

Summary

The question about paying tribute to Caesar is one of the most incendiary queries ever posed to Jesus. It seems straightforward, but either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response is politically perilous. Jesus’s answer seems equally straightforward, but scholars have debated its meaning, even the basic question of whether it is affirmative or negative. But many analyses have erred by considering the logion apart from Jesus’s use of the coin as a visual aid. After a brief survey of visual aids in biblical narratives and classical rhetoric, it becomes clear that the coin adds materially to Jesus’s response and clarifies his meaning.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most politically incendiary question ever put to Jesus concerned the tribute to Rome: ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ (Mark 12:14; Matt. 22:17; Luke 20:22). There was no safe answer. A negative response would please Jewish nationalists but would leave Jesus vulnerable to the charge of sedition. A positive response would be politically expedient but would undermine Jesus’s popularity with the crowds.

Jesus’s terse response has generated an immense amount of scholarly discussion.[1] It seems to encapsulate, if any single verse can, his political

[1] For a helpful bibliography up to the late 1990s, see Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001): 240-42. See also the extensive *Literaturverzeichnis* in Niclas Förster, *Jesus und die Steuerfrage: die Zinsgroschenperikope auf dem religiösen und politischen Hintergrund ihrer Zeit* (WUNT 294; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012): 301-66.

https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.27746
https://tyndalebulletin.org/

outlook. But is Jesus's meaning clear, even at the most basic level? Is his answer a 'yes' or a 'no'? Interpretations of Jesus's response range from positive to negative to uncertain. R. T. France commented that 'interpreters have disagreed ever since as to which side, if either, [Jesus's] pronouncement actually favours'.[2] Another scholar says, despairingly, 'At this point, disagreement is so widespread as to defy categorization.'[3]

2. The Socio-Political and Religious Nature of the Dilemma

The tribute story appears in all three Synoptic Gospels and also is extant in three non-canonical versions: Egerton Papyrus 2, the Gospel of Thomas, and the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr.[4] My concern is the Synoptic texts, which are substantially the same. The differences are found in incidental details, whereas the concluding aphorism of Jesus displays the greatest stability.[5]

---

[2] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002): 465. J. Duncan M. Derrett opines that Jesus's response 'looks at first sight like an oracle, ambiguous, cryptic, a clever means of avoiding trouble'. See J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970): 314.

[3] David T. Owen-Ball, 'Rabbinic Rhetoric and the Tribute Passage (Mt. 22:15-22; Mk. 12:13-17; Lk. 20:20-26)', *NovT* 35.1 (1993): 1-14, here p. 1. Perhaps unaware of Owen-Ball's statement, Justin S. Ukpong outlines five categories of interpretation: the political, the ironic, the anti-zealotic, the zealotic, and the liberationist. See Justin S. Ukpong, 'Tribute to Caesar, Mark 12:13-17 (Mt 22:15-22; Lk 20:20-26)', *Neot* 33.2 (1999): 433-44. Simeon R. Burke likewise defies Owen-Ball's diagnosis and suggests four categories. See Simeon R. Burke, '"Render to Caesar the Things of Caesar and to God the Things of God": Recent Perspectives on a Puzzling Command (1945–Present)', *Currents in Biblical Research* 16.2 (2018): 157-90. D.-A. Koch tellingly notes that there is often 'a close correspondence between the historical situation of the respective exegetes and their political preferences on the one hand and the interpretations proposed by them on the other hand'. See D.-A. Koch, 'Die Kontroverse über die Steuer (Mt 22,15-22 / Mk 12,13-17 / Lk 20,20-26)' in *Christ and the Emperor: The Gospel Evidence*, ed. G. Van Belle and J. Verheyden (Leuven: Peeters, 2014): 203-27, here p. 204.

[4] See John Dominic Crossan, 'Mark 12:13-17', *Int* 37.44 (1983): 397-401, esp. 399-401; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985): 1290-91; and E. Cuvillier, 'Marc, Justin, Thomas et les autres: Variations autour de la péricope de denier à César', *Études théologiques et religieuses* 67.3 (1992): 329-44. Förster, *Jesus und die Steuerfrage*, 264-78 discusses the texts in the Egerton Papyrus and the Gospel of Thomas as instances of the Christian reception of Jesus's saying. See also Burke, '"Render to Caesar"', 161.

[5] On the differences between Mark and Matthew, see Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995): 634. On the differences between Mark and Luke, see Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, 1289-90.

In the scene's introduction Mark (followed by Matthew) includes the Herodians along with the Pharisees in the interrogating party.[6] Little is known about the identity and convictions of the Herodians, but the name suggests that they were partisans of the dynasty of Herod the Great.[7] If that is correct, then they were loyal to a ruler (presumably Herod Antipas) who held power at the discretion of Rome.[8] As collaborators with Roman power, they would have been sympathetic to the emperor, and so would likely have supported the payment of the tax.[9] The stance of the Herodians would have been the opposite of that of the Zealots. This makes sense of Josephus's statement that in the lead-up to the Jewish War the Zealots engaged in murderous attacks on Herodian nobles (*J.W*. 4.139-41).[10]

The Pharisees, on the other hand, are portrayed as aligned with the common people. Josephus repeatedly mentions that the Pharisees were popular with the multitudes (*Ant*. 13.288, 298, 401) and at times displayed opposition to the ruling authorities, particularly the house of Herod (*Ant*. 17.41-46). Indeed, the proto-Zealot movement of Judas the Galilean had a Pharisee, Zadok, as its co-founder (*Ant*. 18.4). This is not to suggest that the Pharisees were crypto-Zealots, but rather they were *theologically* allied with the Zealots, and Pharisees who were more *politically* radical would have blurred the boundary between the

---

6 Luke never speaks of the Herodians, and his Gospel's final mention of the Pharisees is in 19:39. He implies that the interrogators are scribes and chief priests (see 20:19). But Luke, more explicitly than Mark and Matthew, identifies the questioners' motives as political, 'so as to hand him over to the rule and authority of the governor' (v. 20).

7 BDAG, 440. The occurrences in the Gospels are the earliest extant references. Josephus uses the more proper Greek form Ἡρώδειος in *J.W*. 1.319 in reference to supporters of Herod the Great, and a related construction (τοὺς τὰ Ἡρώδου φρονοῦντας) in *Ant*. 14.250. For a survey of viewpoints and a negative judgement about historicity, see John P. Meier, 'The Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians', *JBL* 119 (2000): 740-46. See also Meier's *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 3 Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001): 560-65.

8 For an attempt to locate the alliance between the Herodians and the Pharisees in the reign of Herod Agrippa I (41–44 CE), see N. H. Taylor, 'Herodians and Pharisees: The Historical and Political Context of Mark 3:6; 8:15; and 12:13-17', *Neot* 34.2 (2000): 299-310.

9 Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 816. Marcus notes that 'the Herodian dynasty was dependent on imperial patronage' (822).

10 See Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1999): 223-29. 'The Zealots in particular appear to have focused their attacks on the Herodian nobility' (p. 224).

groups.[11] The average Pharisee did not oppose Rome to the point of taking up arms, but would have resented the tribute and paid it begrudgingly.

Mark thus seems to portray the bipartite delegation of interrogators as including representatives of groups who fell on opposite sides of the question posed to Jesus. The collaborationist Herodians would have been alarmed if Jesus flatly opposed the tribute; the populist Pharisees would have been alienated by a facile endorsement of the tribute. They were thus 'two groups of antagonists between whom Jesus was obliged to weave his way carefully in order not to attract the hostility of either'.[12]

The query also had religious implications, both because of the authority that imposed the tax and because of the coin itself. The fact that Judaea had been subordinated to Rome in 63 BCE and later, in 6 CE, made an imperial province was odious to freedom-loving Judaeans. Under the new Syrian governor, Quirinius, it was not surprising that a census and the related threat of taxation sparked the revolt of Judas and Zadok (*Ant*. 17.354; 18.1-10; *J.W*. 2.117-18; see also Acts 5:37). The tribute was an annual reminder that the Jews were a subject people.[13]

In addition to that general offence, the very coin used to pay the tax may have been offensive. The coin in question has been identified with reasonable certainty as a denarius of Tiberius.[14] The obverse side had the head of Tiberius with the inscription TI[BERIUS] CAESAR DIVI AUG[USTI] F[ILIUS] AUGUSTUS. The reverse side had a seated lady, perhaps Livia, the mother of Tiberius, personifying the goddess Pax, with the inscription PONTIF[EX] MAXIM[US]. The writing thus conferred divine and sacerdotal honours on the emperor. The likelihood that this is

---

[11] In describing the 'Fourth Philosophy' of the Jews, Josephus notes that they agree in all (theological) matters with the Pharisees but are distinguished by an unconquerable love of liberty and an exclusive devotion to God as their master (*Ant*. 18.23).

[12] Etienne Trocme, *The Formation of the Gospel According to Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975): 91 n. 4. There is a longstanding debate about whether the Zealots were an organised movement at the time of Jesus, or whether we should only speak of Zealots proper nearer the time of the Jewish war. In any case, Zealot *ideology* existed at the time of Jesus.

[13] David H. Wenkel discusses the use of coins by those in power to assert their identity and maintain political control. See David H. Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts in the World of the New Testament* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2017): 139-56.

[14] See the reproductions in H. St J. Hart, 'The Coin of "Render to Caesar" (A Note on Some Aspects of Mark 12:13-17; Matt. 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26)' in *Jesus and the Politics of his Day*, ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: CUP, 1984): 241-48. Cf. Herbert Loewe, *'Render unto Caesar': Religious and Political Loyalty in Palestine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1940): 140-41 and Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 34.

the coin in question is increased by the large number of them that were issued.[15]

The inscription was no doubt considered blasphemous, but it is not clear that Jews at the time of Jesus would have eschewed the coins for that reason.[16] Appeal is sometimes made to later sources (Hippolytus, the Talmud) that speak of zealous Jews who would not carry or even gaze upon pagan coins, but application of such texts to first-century Jews is anachronistic.[17] More importantly, none of the Synoptic accounts suggests that the coins were shunned for this reason. Mention is made of the image and the inscription for the purposes of identification, but there is no indication that either was the reason for opposing the tribute. For Jews at the time of Jesus, the use of the coin for routine transactions does not seem to be at issue.

3. The Meaning of Jesus's Response

Interpreters have traditionally regarded the thrust of Jesus's response as positive: 'Yes, it is lawful to pay the tax.'[18] But this judgement is by no

---

[15] Hart, 'The Coin', 244-45.

[16] Literary evidence suggests that both Jews and Romans were attentive to the images and inscriptions on coins and *sometimes* responded to them emotionally. In the second century, for example, the image of Nero on a coin might elicit disgust. See Michael P. Theophilos, *Numismatics and Greek Lexicography* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2020): 76.

[17] Hippolytus (*Haer*. 9.26) speaks of strict members of the Essene community who would not handle, carry, or even look upon a coin with an idolatrous image. The rabbinic sources that speak of holy persons who avoided 'gazing upon a coin' are discussed in Loewe, *'Render unto Caesar'*, 87-96. Paul Corby Finney makes a case for iconic coins being offensive to later Jews, but he acknowledges that 'The evidence for rigoristic forms of Jewish aniconism in Roman Palestine is varied, fragmentary, and uneven in quality.' He also notes that aniconism is not a concern for Mark's unconventional Jesus. See Finney, 'The Rabbi and the Coin Portrait (Mark 12:15b, 16): Rigorism Manqué', *JBL* 112.4 (1993): 629-44, p. 634. Martin Rist discusses the evidence of historical conflicts that demonstrate Jewish aniconism, particularly vis-à-vis objects of reverence such as military standards. This religious scruple may extend to coinage in a later period, but Rist's conclusion that Jesus must have shared this compunction and so 'it [is] unlikely that Jesus ever displayed an imperial denarius' finds no support in the pericope or the Gospels generally. See Martin Rist, 'Caesar or God (Mark 12:13-17)? A Study in *Formgeschichte*', *JR* 16.3 (1936): 317-31. Niclas Förster (*Jesus und die Steuerfrage*, 24-143) assembles an impressive list of historical events and textual witnesses related to Jewish opposition to paying taxes to a foreign power. Still, the question remains whether religious objections to handling or viewing pagan coinage were the presenting issue at the time of Jesus.

[18] Those who construe Jesus's response as essentially positive include Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991): 280-81; Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008): 546; and I. Howard

means unanimous. Many have found significant ambiguity in Jesus's saying. A sampling:

- 'Jesus turned the tables on the questioners, forcing them to decide what belonged to Caesar and what to God.'[19]
- 'The precise meaning of Jesus's statement is not obvious. In fact, Jesus probably intended his statement to be ambiguous.'[20]
- 'In its enigmatic brevity [Jesus's saying] offers no basis for answering the question … how the [tribute] problem will finally be solved … it leaves the question open.'[21]

These interpreters understand Jesus's response as equivocal and cryptic.

Going beyond declaring Jesus's answer ambiguous, some scholars have construed it to be negative, suggesting in various ways that Jesus meant 'No, the tax should not be paid.'[22] An early proponent of this view was Robert Eisler, who saw Jesus as an anti-Roman revolutionary. With regard to the tribute, Eisler insisted that Jesus disdained the whole monetary system of the empire.

> 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's' really means: 'Throw Caesar's, i.e., Satan's, money down his throat, so that you may then be free to devote yourselves wholly to the service of God' … Far from sanctioning the payment of tribute to Caesar, Jesus is wholly on the side of Judas of Galilee, but goes far beyond him in that he requires his disciples, the citizens of the coming kingdom of God, to renounce not only their service of Caesar, but also, and above all, their service of mammon.[23]

Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 735. In Burke's categories these positive responses would be 'complementarian' (if the things of Caesar and the things of God are parallel, and not necessarily competing, obligations) or 'subordinationist' (if payment of the tax is condoned but subordinated to the far greater obligation to God). See Burke, '"Render to Caesar"', 165-67, 171-74.

19 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007): 557.

20 Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 247.

21 Konrad Weiss, *TDNT* 9.81-82. Burke's third category, 'Ambivalent Readings' (168-71), is relevant here.

22 Burke calls these negative responses 'Exclusivist Readings' and notes their connection, in recent years, to postcolonial criticism. See Burke, '"Render to Caesar"', 162-65.

23 Robert Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist: According to Flavius Josephus' Recently Rediscovered 'Capture of Jerusalem' and other Jewish and Christian Sources* (London: Methuen, 1931): 334-35. This is the gist of William R. Herzog's reading also. Jesus 'dissembles', giving a disguised, coded answer that in essence means that Caesar's idolatrous and blasphemous coin should be thrown back in his face. See 'Dissembling, a Weapon of the Weak: The Case of Christ and Caesar in Mark 12:13-17 and Romans 13:1-7', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21.4 (1994): 339-60, esp. 350;

J. Spencer Kennard's short monograph on the tribute question similarly concludes that Jesus's answer is essentially negative.[24] He construes the crowd's reaction as one of enthusiasm, implying that Jesus had sided with beleaguered taxpayers. In addition, Kennard understands the role of the Messiah as inevitably one who would discourage homage to Rome. Hence, Jesus, as someone with a messianic self-understanding, would surely have opposed not just the tribute, but Caesar himself. He concludes confidently that 'we have every reason for believing that Jesus had encouraged non-payment of the tribute'.[25]

More recently, in a political reading of Mark's Gospel, Ched Myers asserts:

> There are simply no grounds for assuming (as so many bourgeois exegetes do) that Jesus was exhorting his opponents to pay the tax. He is inviting them to act according to their allegiances, stated clearly as *opposites* … Mark thus in no uncertain terms rejects the option of political cooperation with Rome, and repudiated the authority of Caesar and his 'coin.'[26]

Likewise, Richard Horsley, in numerous publications, has argued for understanding Jesus's response as essentially negative:

> Cleverly avoiding a direct answer, Jesus insists upon Israelite law over against imperial rule: 'giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar' means they should not pay the tribute, since according to Israelite tradition everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar.[27]

Finally, in a lengthy article, Fernando Bermejo-Rubio argues for a seditious, anti-Roman Jesus. He connects the pronouncement in Mark 12:17 with the accusation in the Lukan trial scene ('He forbids payment of taxes to Caesar'; Luke 23:2) and argues that this converging material indicates that Jesus opposed payment of the tribute. Thus Jesus is

---

also Herzog's *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000): 224-32.

[24] J. Spencer Kennard, *Render to God: An Historical Rediscovery of Jesus for Modern Christians* (New York: OUP, 1950): 43-49.

[25] Kennard, *Render to God*, 139.

[26] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988): 312 (original emphasis).

[27] Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001): 43. See also Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993): 306-17. Elsewhere he speaks almost glibly of Jesus's 'declaration that the people owe no tribute to Rome'. See Horsley, '"By the Finger of God": Jesus and Imperial Violence' in *Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Shelly Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005): 51-80, quote from p. 74.

> a link within the chain that goes from Judas the Galilean, through to his sons, to the rebels of the First Jewish War. For all of them, the tribute to Caesar was intolerable, for it meant giving of the resources of God's Holy Land to the upkeep of a heathen rule.[28]

These provocative, pro-Zealot interpretations of Jesus's aphorism are intriguing but problematic because they remove the saying from its narrative context. The saying must be read with particular attention to the combination of the verbal content of the aphorism with the use of a coin as a visual aid. Ancient speakers understood that visual aids enhanced communication both dramatically and materially. A brief foray into some ancient rhetorical examples will demonstrate this.

4. Visual Aids in Graeco-Roman Oratory

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and even though its medium is primarily oral, ancient orators understood that visual aids, when properly employed, increased the persuasive force of their speech. A clear example comes from Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 35.7 [4]). He reports that Lucius Hostilius Mancinus, who was among the first persons to enter Carthage after it fell to Rome in 146 BCE, campaigned for the consulate in Rome by displaying a painting of the city's conquest.[29] Mancinus stood next to the painting as he described the details of the siege. The artistic representation added sufficient force to his verbal account such that he was awarded the consulship at the next legislative assembly.

A variety of physical objects might be used to supplement a speaker's words, often by means of a simple gesture. An orator speaking in a temple could gesture toward the cult statue of a deity to evoke the virtues associated with that god or goddess. This was especially easy in political and religious forums, which often were decorated with statuary, monuments, war trophies, and other cultic and military objects.[30] The

---

[28] Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, 'Jesus and the Anti-Roman Resistance: A Reassessment of the Arguments', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12.1-2 (2014): 1-105, here p. 28.

[29] Eva C. Keuls, 'Rhetoric and Visual Aids in Greece and Rome' in *Painter and Poet in Ancient Greece: Iconography and the Literary Arts*, ed. Eva C. Keuls (Stuttgart: Teubner 1997): 201-16; esp. 210.

[30] Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003): 17-33; esp. 19-23. See also Fritz Graf, 'Gestures and Conventions: The Gestures of Roman Actors and Orators' in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992): 36-58, especially the concept of 'pointers' or 'indexical gestures', p. 39; William

exploitation of such objects in oratory is usually implicit, but highly likely, as when Cicero directly addressed the statue of Jupiter in a speech (*Cat*. 1.11.33). Other times the appeal is explicit, as in Cicero's third oration against Catiline, when he refers to 'that statue [of Jupiter] that you now see' (*Cat*. 3.7.20). In this case Cicero had secured the placement of the statue in advance and thus 'maximized the effectiveness of his oration by arranging for an appropriate prop to be set up in the Forum'.[31]

According to the biographer Suetonius, Galba delivered a withering critique of Nero and his depredations by setting portraits and statues of Nero's victims in front of the tribunal from which he spoke. Galba even introduced a young man who had been exiled by Nero so as to add a living testimony to Nero's crimes.[32] Gruesome props were sometimes employed to dramatise the crimes of those being prosecuted. Quintilian mentions the custom of introducing 'blood-stained swords, fragments of bone taken from the wound, and garments spotted with blood' as visual aids (*Inst.* 6.2.30).[33]

The human body was also used as a visual aid: 'In the late republic it was a standard practice in the lawcourts to parade the family of the accused before the jury, particularly young children or aged parents, in order to provoke sympathy.'[34] Cicero claims once to have evoked a great outpouring of lament by holding up the young son of the accused (*De or*. 38.131). When used skilfully, visual aids added power to a speech, for 'visual reception is more effective than auditive, and the rhetoric of the image more persuasive than the rhetoric of the word'.[35]

David Shiell, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 57-62; Anthony Corbeill, *Nature Embodied: Gesture in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and D. H. Berry and Andrew Erskine, ed., *Form and Function in Roman Oratory* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010): esp. 142-44.

31 Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations*, 26.

32 Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations*, 28-29; Suetonius, *Galba* 10.

33 Gabriella Moretti notes that orators had to be cautious when using sensational props. Their dramatic intent might backfire if an opponent could turn them into comic elements. See Gabriella Moretti, 'Mezzi visuali e retorica latina: strumenti visivi della performance oratoria', *Moderna: Semestrale di Teoria e Critica della Letteratura* 6.2 (2004): 100-130, esp. 124-25.

34 Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations*, 29. See also Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.2.30.

35 Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 45. Plett chiefly has in mind the graphic *description* of objects rather than their actual introduction into the court, but his point is all the more valid for the material use of props. On *enargeia*, see Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.2.63 and 8.3.61. See also Keuls, 'Rhetoric and Visual Aids', 204-206.

5. Visual Aids in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament

In the Hebrew Bible, prophetic symbolic acts were a type of object lesson in which a prophetic oracle was combined with actions and/or props so as to enact a divine word visually.[36] Toward the end of Israel's united monarchy the prophet Ahijah met Jeroboam on a road outside Jerusalem and tore his new cloak into twelve pieces. He divided the pieces into a group of ten and a group of two, symbolising the ten tribes that God was giving to Jeroboam and the remainder to David's son (1 Kgs 11:29-33). The tearing of the cloak thus added vivid force to the depiction of Solomon's kingdom. The division will destroy the integrity of the kingdom, ripping it asunder as if it were a garment never to be restored.

Later in the history of Israel numerous examples of symbolic acts can be found in the prophetic writings. Jeremiah was instructed to deliver an oracle of judgement after breaking a pottery vessel, an act that would symbolise the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 19:1-15). Ezekiel, in particular, used a variety of objects to enact oracles about the judgement that would befall the nation: a clay tablet, an iron pan, a sword, a set of scales, a signpost, and a stick of wood (Ezek. 4:1-3; 5:1-4; 21:19-22; 37:15-23). These props were highly symbolic in that they did not represent their normal, literal meaning; for example, the iron pan did not represent a cooking utensil but iron siege works. Nevertheless, they provided a visual and material symbol of an otherwise verbal communication.

In the New Testament we find the prophet Agabus using Paul's belt as a ligature to symbolise the coming capture and trial of the apostle (Acts 21:10-11). In Acts 17, in a more direct use of objects *in situ*, the apostle himself appeals to the idols and altars in Athens as evidence of their religiosity. He famously refers to an inscription 'To an Unknown God' (Acts 17:22-23). Whether Paul gestured toward those objects as he spoke is not stated in the text, but they could have served as visual aids given their notoriety and proximity, even if Paul was not able to point to them.

Jesus himself provides two examples of visual aids of a sort. The first is his use of a child in a lesson on servanthood and discipleship. Mark's Gospel describes the scene thus: 'Taking [a little child] in his arms, he

[36] See Åke Viberg, *Prophets in Action: An Analysis of Prophetic Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2007).

said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me"' (Mark 9:33-36). The point could be made without the introduction of the child, but the latter provides a visual demonstration of the lesson.[37]

Finally, the scene at the Last Supper entails a representative use of objects. Here the objects of bread and wine are used to symbolise Jesus's body and blood: 'This is my body … This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mark 14:22,24). The physical tokens enact Jesus's point and provide a ritual demonstration of it. The objects do not, however, make the saying of Jesus more concrete, which is normally the function of visual aids. If anything, the bread and wine shift the meaning from the concrete to the abstract and necessitate a figurative understanding of the saying.

On the basis of this short survey, physical objects as adjuncts to speech in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament tend toward symbolisation rather than concrete exemplification. Jesus's presentation of the tribute coin has the visual dimension in common with these other biblical examples, but in terms of its function, it finds closer parallels in the visual aids of Graeco-Roman rhetoric.

6. The Function of Visual Aids

How, then, do visual aids function? Firstly, and most obviously, they supplement verbal communication with a graphic dimension and often add affective force to the cognitive content provided by the words. Visual aids evoke emotions: anger, fear, sympathy, laughter, envy, or admiration. A bloody sword arouses anger toward the defendant and sympathy for the victim. A shredded garment heightens the horror of a divided kingdom. A belt binding one's hands and feet dramatises the fearful prospect of an arrest.

Secondly, beyond adding affective force, visual aids of Graeco-Roman rhetoric often clarify and concretise the meaning of verbal statements. When a speaker pointed to a statue or placed a hand upon an object, the gesture and the prop together removed any ambiguity about

[37] See Tomas Kroksmark, 'How Did Jesus Teach? The Evangelists' Descriptions of the Teaching Methodology of Jesus', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 40.2 (1996): 103-35; here p. 124.

the topic of discussion. When a speaker called attention to a war trophy, the audience was reminded of a specific battle, the participants therein, and the outcome of the conflict. Verbal statements often have a range of referential possibilities, and this range is narrowed by a visual aid.

Thirdly, and most importantly vis-à-vis the tribute question, visual aids may add to the meaning of a statement, supplying specific content that would otherwise be absent or ambiguous. A fascinating example of this occurs in Aristophanes's *Frogs* (lines 1500-1514). In the closing scene of the play, Pluto urges Aeschylus to facilitate travel to the underworld for four Athenian officials. The means of their exodus from this life is indicated in Greek by demonstrative pronouns without any specification of the objects. Pluto says 'Give *this* to Cleophon, and *these* to the tax collectors Myrmex along with Nicomachos, and *this* to Archenomos.' The directions are unintelligible unless the actor playing Pluto is gesturing toward some implements. Alan Boegehold explains:

> Four main ways to commit suicide were generally contemplated in antiquity: cutting or stabbing oneself, hanging oneself, jumping from a height, and taking poison. An editor therefore who wants to clarify these lines can choose two or three of the known ways, adjust the gender of the demonstrative pronouns to make them fit, and offer readers the particulars. Sword, noose, and hemlock are possibilities, but in any case, there had to be in addition big, vivid gestures and significant objects that were recognizable at a distance.[38]

This is a clear example of what Adam Kendon observes: 'A gesture may contribute to the *propositional content* of an utterance by pointing to the object of reference in the discourse.'[39] This goes beyond evoking emotions. The visual aid is essential to the communicative act, which would otherwise be incomprehensible or incomplete.

Similarly, the Gospel scene in which Jesus responds to the tribute question relies on both the saying and the coin for its meaning.[40] One scholar pondered whether this might be 'the first instance of the use of a

---

[38] Alan L. Boegehold, *When a Gesture Was Expected: A Selection of Examples from Archaic and Classical Greek Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999): 70-71, 112-13.

[39] Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004): 160 (my emphasis). On the communicative power of objects, see Reinhard Breymayer, 'Zur Pragmatik des Bildes: Semiotische Beobachtungen zum Streitgespräch Mk 12, 13-17 ("Der Zinsgroschen") unter Berücksichtigung der Spieltheorie', *Linguistica Biblica* 13/14 (1972): 19-51, esp. pp. 26-27.

[40] The coin itself implies ownership since it was a 'common public perception that coins with the emperor's image and inscription meant that "this coin belongs to Caesar"' (Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 6).

coin, imaginatively, as a "visual aid", in teaching', noting that it added 'vividness, and a sense of drama'.[41] I would argue that it does this, but much more: it adds *materially* to Jesus's communication; it adds propositional content. This tribute coin is precisely 'what belongs to Caesar'.

7. The Tribute Question and the Politics of Jesus

Jesus's response to the tribute question is probably his most directly political saying in the Synoptic Gospels, and provided that it is interpreted in the narrative context of the Gospels and the historical context of Jesus's career, it can yield insights about his general political outlook.[42]

It must first be acknowledged that the combination of the saying and the introduction of the coin as a visual aid makes it nearly impossible that Jesus's answer is a repudiation of the tribute. If Jesus had *only* uttered a verbal response, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,' one might infer that, since all things are God's, nothing should be rendered to Caesar. But the visual aid complements the utterance. Consider the series of actions leading up to the saying: firstly Jesus requests the coin; secondly he secures the coin from the audience; thirdly he enquires about the coin's image and inscription; and fourthly the inquisitors respond by identifying the coin with Caesar. In the context of these actions, the meaning of Jesus's statement can scarcely be 'Render nothing to Caesar.' He had just held up the very coin involved in the tax and called for it to be given back (ἀπόδοτε) to Caesar. Jesus may have wanted to minimise the claim of Caesar, but in the full context of the verbal exchange *and* the actions, he can hardly have meant 'Do not pay the tax.' His response was subtle, but not equivocal.

Neither does the reaction of the crowd support the interpretation of Jesus's statement as opposition to the tax. If his statement had been a rejection of the tax, and the crowd had understood it as such, their reaction might have been a mixture of cheering support from the

---

41 Hart, 'The Coin', 241.

42 Christopher Bryan concludes not only that Jesus's answer to the tribute question is essentially positive, but that this interpretation 'seems perfectly in line with Jesus' general attitude [toward Rome's power]'. See Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: OUP, 2005): 46.

nationalists and villainous hand-rubbing by Jesus's opponents, who now had a basis to accuse him before the governor. But all three Synoptic accounts describe the reaction as one of amazement. (Luke adds the element of the frustration of their plan. The fact that Jesus had thwarted them shows that the later charge in Luke 23:2 is false.)

Jesus's response, therefore, is highly unlikely to align him with Zealot ideology (or the later Zealot movement).[43] But what then does his response imply? It may be helpful to examine the two halves sequentially. The referent for the first half is starkly limited by the introduction of the coin. The tribute coin is equated with 'the things of Caesar'. This is especially clear in the Markan account, in which the last word out of the interrogators' mouths is Καίσαρος and the first words out of Jesus's mouth are τὰ Καίσαρος. Thus the referent for 'the things of Caesar' is not open-ended. Jesus's display of the coin simultaneously concretises and restricts the meaning of τὰ Καίσαρος.

Jesus does not stop, however, after addressing the tribute question. He puts the issue of the tax in the larger context of responsibility toward God. 'Duty to Caesar is surpassed by duty to God … One cannot consider political and civil duties apart from faith, but only as expressions of the prior and ultimate claims of God.'[44] But the second half of Jesus's response does not have the implicit restriction of the first half. It is entirely open-ended, and Jesus's hearers must ponder its possible meanings.[45] If Jesus had also called for the coin used to pay the annual temple tax (the *didrachma* of Matt. 17:24) and had held it aloft while saying 'and render to God the things that are God's', then the second half would have a specific referent akin to the denarius of the first half. This would imply a parallelism: give Caesar the denarius; give God the temple coin.[46]

---

[43] Otto Betz declares that Jesus's answer to the tribute question 'should put to rest every Zealot-interpretation of Jesus'. See Betz, 'Jesus und die Zeloten' in *Gewalt in Jesu Namen?* ed. Peter Beyerhaus and Walter Künneth (Lahr-Dinglingen: St. Johannis-Druckerei, 1987): 30-45, here p. 36.

[44] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002): 364.

[45] France, *Gospel of Mark*, 469.

[46] Ethelbert Stauffer proposes that Jesus's twofold response calls for both the payment of the tribute to Caesar and the payment of the temple tax. See *Christ and the Caesars: Historical Sketches* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955): 132-34. This hypothetical scenario would lend support to the idea of two kingdoms. See the discussion in Walter E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999): 64-68. Robert C. Tannehill rightly questions whether Jesus's response is an antithetical parallelism in *The Sword of his Mouth* (Missoula: Scholars

The two halves (the things of Caesar; the things of God) are thus not equal or parallel, but it is also clear that they are not mutually exclusive options. Jesus is not giving his opponents a disjunctive ultimatum: 'Give to Caesar *or* give to God.' In Mark 12:17 the two halves of the aphorism are conjoined by καί and so are correlated to one another, not opposed. One can render to Caesar what is his *and* render to God what is God's. The latter does not exclude the former.

What then is the meaning of the second half? Could Jesus be alluding to the 'image of God' borne by human beings (Gen. 1:26-27)? By this interpretation, to render to God would mean to give oneself to God.[47] The idea can be traced back at least as far as Tertullian (*Idol.* 15). Such an allusion is possible, but the reference to Caesar's *inscription* would complicate this interpretation since there is no counterpart with God.[48] Moreover, while a connection to the image of God is conceivable, it would restrict Jesus's meaning to the human element of creation. Jesus surely would have affirmed that 'The earth is the LORD's and everything in it' (Ps. 24:1). Hence 'the things that are God's' surely include human life but go beyond it.

Finally, the object lesson and the saying are causally related. Explicit inferential conjunctions have been added in Matt. 22:21 (οὖν) and Luke 20:25 (τοίνυν). Mark's simpler, asyndetic style has no connective, but the causal relationship is implied.[49] The coin and the utterance must be taken together.

Press, 1975): 171-77. The aphorism does not mark out two neatly defined spheres but rather provokes reflection on the relationship between one's obligation to God and one's obligation to Caesar.

47 Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989): 198; Collins, *Mark*, 557.

48 Charles H. Giblin notes that exegetes who opt for this interpretation of 'image' generally ignore the 'inscription' since it has no counterpart. See '"The Things of God" in the Question Concerning Tribute to Caesar (Lk 20:25; Mk 12:7; Mt 22:21)', *CBQ* 33 (1971): 510-27; esp. 522-23. Giblin proposes Prov. 7:3, Jer. 38:33, and Isa. 44:5 as possible biblical precedents for the inscription of God. Owen-Ball ('Rabbinic Rhetoric', 10-11) argues for Exod. 13:9 in this connection, but none of these parallels has the verbal link that Gen. 1:26-27 has to 'image'.

49 F. F. Bruce, 'Render to Caesar' in *Jesus and the Politics of his Day*, ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: CUP, 1984): 249-64, here 258.

8. Conclusion

Jesus's response calls for neither seditious resistance nor passive accommodation. He puts the claim of Rome in the larger context of God's covenant claim upon Israel and thereby minimises and marginalises Rome's claim. Paying the tribute is not a violation of divine law, but it must be understood that Rome's claim on the people of God is a trifle compared to God's claim. The meaning of the first half of Jesus's answer is precise and delimited: what is owed to Caesar is this very coin. The implication is minimal and perfunctory: pay the tribute. The second half of Jesus's answer, however, is expansive and evocative. The hearers are prompted to imagine what is owed to God, and the possibilities are varied and unlimited.[50]

[50] As Tannehill (*The Sword of his Mouth*, 177) says succinctly, 'The story suggests no limit to the "things of God".'