

## MARK 12:13-17 PAYING TAXES

Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006)

### Mark 12: 13-17 Paying taxes (P. 60-65)

Issue with the understanding the question: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" was understood as a solemn statement about the relationship between civil and religious authority, between politics and religion, or, in Christian terms, between "church and state." It has been most commonly understood to mean that there are two separate realms of human life, one religious and one political. In the first, we are to "render to God," and in the second, we are to "render to Caesar." <sup>1</sup>

What this means in practice has varied considerably. It has been understood to mean absolute obedience to the state, notoriously by the majority of German Christians during the Hitler years. But the attitude is far more common. Long before the modern era, monarchs and their supporters used this verse to legitimate their authority: their subjects were to obey them because Jesus said that their political obligation belonged to the ruler's realm. More recently, many American Christians used it during the civil rights era to criticize acts of civil disobedience. This verse, they argued, means that we are to be obedient to civil authority, even if we might also want to modify its laws. <sup>2</sup> Other Christians do not argue for absolute obedience to government, regardless of its character, but nevertheless think that the verse does not mean that religious obligation and political obligation are basically separate. <sup>3</sup>

Who were trapping Jesus?: [In the narrative], people identified as "some Pharisees" and "some Herodians" are sent to Jesus by the authorities. The Pharisees were a Jewish movement committed to an intensification of traditional religious practices, including Sabbath observance and purity laws. Not only were these part of the covenant with God given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, but they were a form of resistance to assimilation to Hellenistic and Roman cultural imperialism. Though we know very little about the Herodians, they were, as the name implies, supporters of the Herods, the royal family of client-ruler appointed by Rome. In his gospel (3:6; 8:15), Mark reports that these two groups were allied with each other and in league with the authorities. <sup>4</sup>

Tax to Rome by Jews: They ask Jesus a question intended to trap him. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? "Should we pay them, or should we not?" It was a volatile question. Ever since the Jewish homeland had been added to the Roman Empire in 63 BCE, Rome had required a large annual "tribute" from the Jewish people. Rome did not collect tribute directly from its individual subjects. Rather, local authorities were responsible for its payment and collection (and in our passage, it is they who send the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus). <sup>5</sup>

Though tribute included the per capita, or "head," tax levied on all adult Jewish men, the annual due to Rome included much more. Most of this was gathered through taxes on land and agricultural production.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 62.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 63.

All of this together contributed to "tribute" to Rome. It was the way the empire profited its possessions. Roman taxation was onerous not only because it was economically burdensome. It also symbolized the Jewish homeland's lack of sovereignty. It underlined the oppression of the Jews by an alien lord, as the word "tribute" itself suggests.<sup>6</sup>

**What was the trap?:** The spokesmen of the authorities set the trap skillfully. Either answer would get Jesus in trouble. If Jesus were to answer no, he could be charged with advocating denial of Roman authority - in short, with sedition. If he were to answer yes, he risked discrediting himself with the crowd, who for both economic and religious reasons resented Roman rule and taxation. Most likely, this was the primary purpose of the question: to separate Jesus from the crowd by leading him into an unpopular response.<sup>7</sup>

**Jesus' Response and His countertrap:** Jesus' response is masterful. he turns the situation back on his opponents. He sets a countertrap when he asks to see a denarius. A denarius was a silver coin equal to approximately a day's wage. His interrogators produce one. Jesus looks at it and then asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" Or in the words of an older translation, "Whose image and inscription is this?" We all know their answer: "The emperor's." Jesus' strategy has led his questioners to disclose to the crowd that they have a coin with Caesar's image on it. In this moment, they are discredited. Why? In the Jewish homeland in the first century, there were two types of coins. One type, because of the Jewish prohibition of graven images, had no human or animal images. The second type (including Roman coinage) had images. Many Jews would not carry or use coins of the second type. But Jesus' interrogators in the story did. The coin they produced had Caesar's image along with the standard and idolatrous inscription heralding Caesars as divine and Son of God. They are exposed as part of the politics of collaboration. Jesus' rhetorical strategy is brilliant : their trap has been evaded, his own countertrap set and sprung.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, even before the famous words about rendering to Caesar, Jesus has won the encounter. His response is in two parallel halves:

1. Give to the emperor the things that are emperor's.
2. Give to God the things that are God's.

Following immediately upon the disclosure that they are carrying a coin with Caesar's image, the first half of the saying means simply, "It's Caesar's coin - give it back to him." This is in effect a nonanswer to the larger question, "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" It cannot be seen as an endorsement of paying taxes to Rome or Rome's rule. If Jesus had wanted to say, "Pay taxes to Caesar," he could simply have answered yes to their question. There would have been no need for the scene with the coin, the central elements of the story.<sup>9</sup>

The nonanswer is not simply a dismissal of the issue, however. **The second half of Jesus' response is both evocative and provocative.** "Give to God the things that are God's." It raises the question, "What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God?" For Jesus and many of his Jewish contemporaries, everything

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<sup>6</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 63

<sup>8</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 64.

belongs to God. So their sacred scripture affirmed. The land of Israel belongs to God - recall Leviticus 25:23, which says that all are tenant farmers or resident aliens on land that belong to God. .. The vineyard belongs to God, not to the local collaborators, not to Rome. Indeed, the whole earth belongs to God: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 14:1). What belongs to Caesar? The implication is, nothing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 65.