

- 19 The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.
- 20 Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.
- 21 So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.
- 22 Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"
- 23 He saw through their duplicity and said to them,
- 24 "Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"
- 25 "Caesar's," they replied. He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."
- 26 They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

The *Encounters with Jesus* series looks at the transforming nature of these interactions. You could not meet Jesus without being challenged, and in many cases transformed altogether. In this particular encounter the end result is one of silence.

I have based this interpretation of the passage on the work of the Hebrew scholar **Randall Buth** from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

During the final week of Jesus' ministry, a crisis developed with the religious authorities.

First, Jesus tried to stop the money lenders and the merchants from operating in the Temple. (Luke 19:45-46) The religious authorities demanded an explanation of his actions, and he responded with a parable about wicked tenants who beat and killed their landlord's son. The authorities knew the

parable was spoken against them, and they sent agents to try to catch Jesus speaking against the Roman government so that they could have him arrested and condemned for sedition.

Loaded Question.

Rabbis answer questions – usually with another question – but that is how they function. “Rabbi what time should I light candles?” “On shabbos do I light the Chanukah candles before or after the shabbos candles?” The Rabbi then gives the ruling according to the traditions of the Talmud or the Scriptures.

The Rabbi Jesus is approached with what seems on the surface to be an ordinary question, but as Luke indicates there is a trick to the question and a hidden agenda. "Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

The pious people saw the Roman government and army as a denial of God’s promises to Israel, pagans who defiled the country by their presence. Many longed for the freedom they enjoyed in the days of the Maccabees, who had thrown out the Seleucid Rulers and restored the Temple. The faithful believers expected God to send his Messiah to liberate them in this way. No self-respecting prophet would tell the pious people that God was happy with Roman rule and that they should be content with the taxes and idolatrous practices of the Roman officials.

But if Jesus said anything about a coming day when they would not pay taxes

to Rome, the agents of the religious authorities would be able to testify that Jesus advocated the overthrow of Roman rule.

Jesus' answer is well known and often quoted - though its impact on the immediate audience often is underestimated or misunderstood.

"Give me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?"

"Caesar's."

Of course at this point Jesus has them already. What were they, who claimed to be so pious, doing walking around with graven images. However Jesus does not close the argument at this point.

He gives his rabbinic ruling.

"Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Jesus' Wordplay

Most interpretations of this verse get some of the application right but miss the dynamics of Jesus' wordplay.

The power of Jesus' response comes from a play on the word "image." (צֶלֶם *tselem*)

Human beings are made in the image of God. Let Caesar have the things he puts his image on, but to God belongs everything that bears His image. In other words all you have, and your whole life, belongs to God. After all, we are created in God's image and we owe him our lives, our time, our money,

our property and our families.

Such submission is the essence of repentance. Caesar and his ilk might claim a person's specific possessions, but God demands the totality of a person.

Rabbinic Debate

We have evidence that Jesus' contemporaries were already acquainted with religious debate concerning "the image of God." There is a story about Hillel, a famous rabbinic teacher who lived a generation before Jesus:

Once when Hillel concluded his lesson and began walking away his disciples asked him "Master, where are you going?"

He answered, "To do a *mitsvah* [commandment]."

They said to him, "And what is the *mitsvah* you are going to do?"

He answered, "To take a bath in the bath house."

That's a *mitsvah*?!" they exclaimed.

"Yes," he said. "The images of kings are placed in their theaters and circuses.

The one appointed to look after these images scrubs and washes them and they [the kings] pay his wages. Not only that, but he is honored like one of the nobles of the kingdom. Now we who have been created in the image and likeness of God, as it is written, 'For in His image did God make man' [Gen. 9:6], how much more [should we scrub and wash ourselves]." (Leviticus Rabbah 34:3)

This is a well-known story that was preserved within Jewish tradition and was probably heard by all Jewish children growing up in Jesus' day. It is typical of rabbinic argument, short and to the point: if pagan images are worth washing, how much more are images of God worthy of washing. What is important for the translator and interpreter is not the merit of taking a bath, but the fact that a sage before the time of Jesus could make a comparison between the image of a king and man who, according to Scripture, is the image of God.

Return to God

In Greek, Jesus' answer is literally, "Then give the things of Caesar to Caesar and the things of God to God." The things that belong to Caesar are the things that are stamped with Caesar's image, and the things that belong to God are the things that are stamped with God's image.

"Give to Caesar what Caesar has made, and what God has made — yourselves — give to God."

Perhaps the most impressive thing about this story is that when Jesus refers to the image metaphor he disarms his opponents and at the same time places a total demand on them. Jesus does not just evade their trap, he calls them back to God.

Jesus challenge still rings out today – render to god the things that belong to God - your life and everything you own.