




THE IMAGE OF AN
EMPEROR
GIVE UNTO CAESAR WHAT IS CAESAR'S . . .
AND TO ELOHIM WHAT IS ELOHIM'S.

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 One of the most famous disputes in history occurs between the Pharisees and Yeshua of Nazareth regarding paying taxes to Caesar. The Synoptic Gospels record that some disciples of Pharisees, together with members of Herod's political party, attempted to entrap him in his words. What is not famous, however, is the immense impact this dispute had on its immediate listeners, including those who tried to trap him. All were amazed at the words of the Rabbi from Nazareth, indeed reading the text by itself, his answer is quite brilliant. However, with knowledge of the Jewish theological background of His words, His answer is beyond brilliant, leaving one dumbfounded, speechless, like those who tried to trap him.

“Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how they might entrap him in his talk. They sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are honest, and teach the way of God in truth, no matter whom you teach, for you aren’t partial to anyone. Tell us therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Yeshua perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money.” They brought to him a denarius. He asked them, “Whose is this image and inscription?” They said to him, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard it, they marveled, and left him, and went away.”

Matthew 22:15-22, Cf. Mark 12: 13-17, Luke 20:20-26

It is important to note that the Pharisees enlisted the help of Herod's political faction. What was the purpose in their presence in this question of *halakha*? The Herodians were *political*, not *religious* figures. Notice the introductory words of the Pharisees,

"Teacher, we know that you . . . teach the way of Elohim in truth, nor do you care about anyone, for you do not regard the social status of men."

They begin to "praise" Yeshua for His fearlessness in preaching the truth, despite whom it might offend, and *intentionally highlight* the fact that he is not afraid to speak it in front of anyone, regardless of their financial, religious or political status. This was said because members of Herod's political party were present, deliberately included in this dispute so they could "witness" His answer to their trick question. Including the Herodians, who would have been quick to inform Herod of the slightest word spoken against Caesar, superficially guarded the Pharisees from being classed as *moserim*, 'informers', who were categorized along with heathens, irreligious Jews, and minim. The Jewish Encyclopedia notes,

"Nothing was more severely punished by the Jews than talebearing; and no one was held in greater contempt than the informer. On account of the fact that his deeds frequently caused mischief and even entailed death and destruction, the sages of the Talmud compared the "moser" to a serpent."

Jewish Encyclopedia on Moser

If Yeshua spoke anything against the tribute paid to Caesar, this would be considered insurrection against Rome. In paying taxes, you acknowledge the governmental authority to whom you give tribute. Denying the power of the ruling government to collect taxes undermines the foundation of their lawful authority. It is no secret that the Jewish people were not fond of Rome, as they rightly felt that Israel belonged to them, and prayed fervently for the coming of the Messiah to restore their kingdom, and autonomy. This hope ultimately culminated in the uprising against Rome, which led to the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Israel.

On the other hand, if Yeshua's answer affirmed the authority of Rome to collect taxes, He in essence would have denied the hope of Israel, their right to autonomy, and indeed the Torah's proclamation that the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. All of his followers, who all passionately desired to see the Kingdom restored to Israel, would have been crushed if Yeshua had sided with Rome and denied a fundamental precept of the Torah. Conversely, if he had denied the right of Caesar to collect taxes, as the P'rushim had expected, the members of Herod's political party would have immediately ran and told Herod, who would in turn have informed Caesar of Yeshua's promotion of insurrection - which inevitably would have led to His arrest and possible execution for sedition. This is the ultimate "rock and a hard place".

However, the wicked plans of the *moserim* are about to be frustrated! The Super-Rabbi asks for the coin for a visual aid for his upcoming answer,

"Show me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's."

What coin was this? What did it look like? It is possible the coin that they brought to was the *Pontif Maxim*:

"Tiberius was Emperor for 23 years and is represented by two denarii. After 15 AD all Tiberius denarii were the same type: PONTIF MAXIM surrounding a seated female figure. Huge numbers of these coins were produced; many thousands of them still exist today."

Doug Smith, Tiberius: The Tribute Penny



Pontiff Maxim. Courtesy Doug Smith

However, there were many denarii circulating at this time, therefore,

" . . . there is no real evidence that Jesus saw this coin. Denarii in circulation that day (over fifteen years into the reign of Tiberius) would have included quite a mix of Republican types and vast numbers of the common types of Caesar Augustus . . . The purpose of the coin in this case could have satisfied by any Republican denarius with a head and Latin inscription. That coin collectors have settled on this one coin as THE Tribute Penny is more of a convention than a historical fact. It is, however, quite likely that this type was among the most common denarii in circulation in the early 30's AD and it does show the Emperor who reigned at the time of the ministry of Jesus Christ."

Doug Smith, *Tiberius: The Tribute Penny*

Confident that they had painted the Great Teacher into an inescapable corner, Yeshua answers their treacherous plot with words that have echoed throughout millennia, "Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they had heard these words, they were amazed, and left Him and went their way."

If this answer is enough to make the eyes of the first time reader widen with admiration for the brilliance of the reply, imagine how much more to those who actually heard Him speak it. However, the theological backdrop of his reply deepens the Rabbi's response, and reveals unknown depths and meaning to His amazing words. Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish scholar at the time of Yeshua, known for his Platonic and allegorical interpretations of the Bible, makes a remarkable comment on the creation of the mind and rational soul of man,

". . . the great Moses has not named the species of the rational soul by a title resembling that of any created being, but has pronounced it an image of the divine and invisible being, making it a coin as it were of sterling metal, stamped and impressed with the seal of God, the impression of which is the eternal word."

Philo, *Concerning Noah's Work As a Planter, Section V, translated by C.D. Yonge*

The Mishnah, an ancient commentary on the Torah, was codified around 120 A.D., yet it preserves older Jewish traditions, many contemporary with the Second Temple period. It is divided into six sections, or orders, which are composed of various tractates of different subject matter. Tractate Sanhedrin, which focuses on criminal law, makes a statement in a similar vein to that of Philo:

"For a person mints many coins with a single seal, and they are all alike one another. But the King of king of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, minted all human beings with that seal of his with which he made the first person, yet not one of them is like anyone else. Therefore everyone is obligated to maintain, "On my account the world was created."

Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5

Professor Brad H. Young, author of many critical works on Yeshua of Nazareth, comments,

"Perhaps these theological concepts serve as a background for the saying of Jesus, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." After all, not only is Caesar's image stamped upon each coin that he has minted; the divine image of the King of

kings is stamped upon each person. Jesus was calling upon the people to give everything to God, the Creator of every human being."

Brad H. Young, *The Parables, Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, Hendrickson Publishers, pg. 10

This understanding amplifies Yeshua's amazing words. Give unto the earthly king his image, and give unto the Heavenly King *His Image*, that is, yourselves, your entire being, and all that is within you. As when the rich young ruler came to Rabbi Yeshua, and asked Him, "What is the greatest *mitzvah* (commandment)?" Yeshua's answer to him was, in essence, the same as it was to the Herodians and Pharisees: Give unto Adonai your entire being, the very fulfillment of the *Sh'ma*:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד׃
וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
בְּכָל־לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדְךָ׃

"Hear O Israel, YHWH our God YHWH is One.
And you shall love YHVH your God
with **all** your heart, with **all** your soul, and with **all** your might."
Deuteronomy 6:4-5