

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Coin in the Fish's Mouth

This story is a nut with a dry, hard shell, but a very sweet kernel."¹ This is how the nineteenth-century Scottish scholar A. B. Bruce begins his treatment of this passage. Another scholar from the same period declares that this is indeed a profound passage, even though it is sometimes imperfectly apprehended, and sometimes its meaning and significance is missed altogether.² What is the point of this miracle? Is it merely that something miraculous happened? Or is this an example, as some have argued, where Jesus appears to want to help *Himself* in a miraculous fashion?³

I. QUESTIONING JESUS' INTEGRITY

Peter was asked if his master paid the Temple tax. The fact that the question is put in the negative form shows that it was a question of criticism. It was, writes Campbell-Morgan, "a question of men who thought they had some occasion of complaint against Jesus."⁴ This tax was due from every adult male Jew (over twenty years of age) to contribute to the Temple. The term "two-drachma" (NASB) amounted to four denarii. Based on Matthew 20:1 - 15 a single denarii was considered a normal day's wages. Ben Franklin's well-known remark, "But in this world nothing can be said to be certain, *except death and taxes,*" seems to be applicable even then! Peter, quick to defend Jesus' honor, answers in the affirmative.

II. QUESTIONING PETER'S UNDERSTANDING

Jesus' inquiry with Peter is not intended as a rebuke, nor does it sanction tax evasion! This was not a civil tax levied by Romans. This tax was of relatively recent origin. It can be traced back to Exodus 30:11 - 16 (cf. also 38:25 - 26; II Chronicles 24:5 - 7) where male adults were required to pay a half shekel *but only once* in a man's lifetime. By N.T. times it had, under the influence of the Pharisees and Sadducean priestly aristocracy, become another added burden on the people.

A. Parabolic Explanation. The use of metaphor is widely attested in rabbinic and Jewish literature, especially comparing God's activity to that of an earthly king.⁵ The Jewish authority insisted that this tax was levied by God, and Jesus therefore begins with their assumption. The term "sons" has reference to the king's own physical sons. "Strangers" are the subjects of the kingdom.

B. Parabolic Lesson. Jesus is the Son of the King. Peter declared shortly before this that Jesus was indeed "the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16). For Jesus to pay the temple tax *was* an humiliation. This voluntary humiliation began with His birth and would end with His death and burial (Philippians 2:5 - 11). This is why this passage is "supremely Christological."⁶ Jesus' appeal to His Sonship was, writes Ridderbos, "a Messianic claim."⁷

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MIRACLE

Jesus did not resort to a miracle in order to avoid hardship—He would not impair the *integrity* of His humiliation. On the contrary, as Bruce writes, He only makes it "glaringly conspicuous."⁸ The miracle does not simply provide a means of paying the tax—rather it reinforces the argument of Jesus' parable. How? It demonstrates, in a remarkable way, that God does not exact taxation from His people, but *on the contrary provides* for His children.⁹ Jesus, by this miracle, reveals Himself here as the Son who had all the Father's belongings at His disposal (see Psalm 50:10 - 12), and who, states Ridderbos, "could use the Father's treasure to pay tax for the Father's house."¹⁰

CONCLUSION: This miracle is only found in Matthew. It was not done in public. In fact, only one disciple, Peter, actually witnessed it. Peter, the one who on the one hand declared the revealed truth "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" and who shortly thereafter felt compelled to rebuke Jesus (Matthew 16:22) and found himself sadly aligned with Satan (16:23 - 24), is now, again, the one Jesus takes time to teach. "The miracle also showed him that all who serve Christ not only are called to share in His humiliation, but also will constantly see His glory."¹¹

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Kregel, 1971), p. 222.
- ² R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and the Parables of Our Lord* (rpt. Revell, 1953), p. 404.
- ³ Cf. H. Van Der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 686. There are also charismatics, like Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, who make this the focus of the miracle. Cf. the critique of these men in D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Hendrickson, 1988).
- ⁴ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Revell, 1939), p. 226. It should be observed that what probably lay behind this question was the perception that Jesus was against the Temple (cf. John 12:6, 21:12 – 17).
- ⁵ Cf. Richard Bauckham, “The Coin in the Fish’s Mouth,” in *Gospel Perspectives: The Miracles of Jesus*, ed. D. Wenham C. Blomberg (JSOT Press, 1986), pp. 219 – 252. I am greatly indebted to Bauckham’s article.
- ⁶ D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin, VIII (Zondervan, 1984), p. 394.
- ⁷ H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: The Bible Student’s Commentary* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 329. The extent to which this passage has been, as Trench observed (cf. endnote #2), misunderstood is seen in P. B. Fitzwater, *Preaching and Teaching The New Testament* (Moody Press, 1957), p. 67, who fails to see anything here but the danger of giving offense, p. 67.
- ⁸ A. B. Bruce, op. cit., p. 227.
- ⁹ Cf. the excellent discussion by Bauckham, op. cit., p. 224.
- ¹⁰ Ridderbos, op. cit., p. 330.
- ¹¹ Ibid.