

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Miracles of Jesus	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	7	Gary L.W. Johnson
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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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?<sup>3</sup>

- 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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; 1 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. Laidlaw, in his masterful treatment, points out: “To apprehend the point of the story the somewhat nice results of the best translation must be regarded. Readers of the A. V. alone – *i.e.*, when not careful students of the margin – are left in ignorance of it by the want of specific accuracy in rendering the names of two ancient coins. The question raised in the conversation between Peter and the tax-collectors, as the A. V. puts it, is about *tribute*. But really the thing in question is not the secular tax-levying which comes up in chap. xxii., where there was an attempt made to entrap the Lord into a political discussion on a question entirely of the Roman or Imperial taxation. There may have been an intention, on this occasion also, to embarrass or perplex, though it is not apparent on the surface of the dialogue. But the question concerned another kind of tax altogether. It was not the tribute due to Caesar, but the temple-tax due to Jehovah, which was the subject of inquiry. The state of the facts is this: the law described in Exod. xxx. 12-16 had fixed at half a shekel the sum to be paid by every Israelite of full age at the sacred enumeration. This sum was considered partly as a donation for the erection of the sanctuary, partly as a ransom or atonement money. This ancient act became, after the Captivity, the warrant for a yearly collection of personal poll-tax for the support of the

Temple service. As all members of the Covenant people – those living out of Palestine not excepted – owed this subscription as a religious duty, delegates from the Temple travelled at the appropriate season through all the provinces for the purpose of collecting it. Some hold that by the time of our Lord the tax had been secularized by the Romans or annexed to the Imperial exactions. Others, with better evidence, believe this undoubted transference to have taken place later. The narrative certainly conveys an impression of manner on the part of the collectors suitable to the gathering of a semi-voluntary contribution rather than to the inevitable demands of the Roman *publicanus*.<sup>5</sup>

- 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> Jesus' appeal to His Sonship was, writes Ridderbos, "a Messianic claim."<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> David Smith likewise underscores this point, saying that Jesus' words to Peter "constitute one of the most striking assertions which Jesus ever made of His divinity. He was the Son of God, and the Temple was His Father's House. For His glory it existed, and not on Him rested the obligation of supporting it by pious offerings. He might have claimed exemption from that sacred impost; yet He would not, lest His action should be misconstrued. To such as did not recognize His lordship, it would have seemed a mere violation of the Law, and He dreaded that imputation. At the outset of His ministry He had asserted the sanctity and permanence of the Law; and to the last He manifested a high reverence for its doctrines and institutions, participating in the worship of Synagogue and Temple and appealing to its testimony in vindication of His Messianic claims. Year by year hitherto he had paid the Temple-tax, and He would pay it now, *lest we make them stumble*."<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Trench observes that, "It is remarkable, and is a solitary instance of the kind, that the issue of this bidding is not told us. We are meant beyond doubt to understand that Peter went to the neighbouring lake, cast in his hook, and in the throat of the first fish that rose to it, found, according to his Lord's word, the coin that was needed. As little here as at Luke v. 4, 6, did the miraculous in the miracle consist in a mere foreknowledge on the Lord's part that this first fish should yield the stater which was needed: He did not merely foreknow; but by the mysterious potency of his will which ran through all nature, drew such a fish to that spot at that moment, and ordained that it should swallow the hook. We see here as at Jonah i. 17 ('the Lord *had prepared* a great fish to swallow up Jonah'), that in the lower spheres of creaturely life there is unconscious obedience to Him; that these also are not *out* of God, but move *in* Him, and are without knowing it,

for grace or for judgment, the active ministers of his will (1 Kings xiii. 24; xvii. 6; xx. 36; 2 Kings xvii. 25; Job v. 22, 23; Jer. v. 6; Ezek. Xiv. 15; Amos ix. 3).”<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Kregel, 1971), p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and the Parables of Our Lord* (rpt. Revell, 1953), p. 404.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> John Laidlaw, *The Miracles of Our Lord: Expository and Homiletic* (rpt. Baker, 1956), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin, VIII (Zondervan, 1984), p. 394.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> A. B. Bruce, op. cit., p. 227.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the excellent discussion by Bauckham, op. cit., p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> Ridderbos, op. cit., p. 330.

<sup>12</sup> David Smith, *The Days of His Flesh: The Earthly Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (rpt. Baker, 1976), p. 281.

<sup>13</sup> Trench, op. cit., p. 416.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.