

THE SYNOPTICS' GOD/CAESAR STORY:

TRICKY QUESTIONS DON'T DESERVE NON-TRICKY ANSWERS ----- ELLIOTT #1785

The Gospels, especially the Synoptics, weave, in and out of Jesus' Story, Jesus' stories ("parables") and sayings (common proverbs and personal aphorisms); and much of the sweat and fun of Gospels hermeneutics is in doping out, in patterns and loci, the strandings: what influenced what how when why in and after Jesus (oral to written, and originals through redactions to canonical texts)? By keeping critical questions in mind, interpreters (1) warn themselves to be modest and (2) enrich their history-and-meaning options....This thinksheet was sparked by Jn. Dominic Crossan's "Mark 12:13-17" (Oct/83 INTERPRETATION, 397-401).

1. JDC thinks this an instance of a narrative dialectic become an aphoristic comment. He assumes the priority of Mark, whence the pericope-episode "was taken into Mt.22.15-22 and L.20.20-26." I rejoin: (1) I hold the priority of Luke; and (2) Why not an aphorism become a dialog?
2. In vs.14, his enemies set Jesus up with an entrapping compliment intended to deprive him of room for trickery or subtlety (my paraphrase of the Greek): "You're your true self, not anybody else's man. You teach God's way with integrity, not tailoring your teaching to what you see on hearers' faces." But if Jesus really had been a simple man, incapable of being indirect and tricky, he would have been killed sooner than he was. Here, his response sidesteps their trap; while it can be read as, politically, either quietist or radical, it *need not* be read as any more clear than an oracular aphorism pregnant with whatever is to be born out of the hearer. Jesus worked his own protractor, determining in each instance the angle of response/attack from 0° to 90°. On my geometric analogy, 0° is changing the subject and 90° is a spear-thrust. I take his God/Caesar response as ambiguous, maddeningly both obfuscating and offensive: 45°. But clear in stating the full context: not (as his attackers) Jews and Caesar, but GOD + Caesar + Jews. They implied God: Jesus consistently, perpetually, pointed to God, the Ultimate/Intimate Context (if I may be, momentarily, panentheistic!). Jesus himself (I believe), not just the Evangelists, models this always-everywhere consciousness and utterance (cf. Paul's "Pray without ceasing"): it is a "note" of Christians.
3. There are tax-evaders (in their own interest) and tax-resisters (political witnesses, as the Zealots, which Jesus was being asked whether he was one of, and clearly answered that he was not).
4. JDC points to the "double dialectic": question/trap, answer/escape; put another way, question/answer, trap/escape. The repetitions, esp. the chiasmic dualism in vs.14, "slow the reader down and make it necessary to think." Only in M. need a coin be gone for: again, a slow-down. (Before East Jordan fell to Israel, I obtained there a coin of this age, face, and inscription; and of course like to feel it's the very one!) The Synoptists agree that the entrapment motive occasioned the incident, and that Jesus' counter-entrapment consisted in getting his enemies to say that the coin was "Caesar's." Jesus' aphoristic-apodictic then incorporates their admission (my paraphrase): "Since you yourselves say the coin is Caesar's, why not give it to him? But the real issue is this: Are you giving God what's God's?" JDC's paraphrase: "Caesar's render to Caesar, and God's to God." M's Greek (399) "keeps their 'Caesar's' and his 'Caesar's' as syntactically close as possible...the narrative's power concerns how they set out to entrap Jesus in his speech and were entrapped instead in their own."
5. L. reduces M./Mt.'s triple interchange to a double, and the two extracanonical accounts reduce to a single interchange...The Gospel of Thomas (discovered 1945), sec. 100, has Jesus add this to his aphorism: "...and give Me what is Mine." GT does not have the entrapment/counter-entrapment motive/theme (and is a witness independent of the Synoptics). The dyad of power (God/Caesar) has become a triad (G./C./Jesus), and the silver has become gold (:denarii were always only silver). JDC 400: "The triple hierarchy dismisses both Caesar and God as part of the Gnostic unconcern for the material universe"...Papyrus Egerton 2 (before AD50!): Jesus, angry at their insincere compliment, accosts them for not following him (JDC 401): "Jesus escapes by simply attacking their intention. Dialogue...has given way to diatribe."