RABBINIC RHETORIC
AND THE TRIBUTE PASSAGE
(MT. 22:15-22; MK. 12:13-17; LK. 20:20-26)

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I. Introduction

The synoptic gospels contain a passage in which Jesus is confronted with the question of whether it is lawful to pay Caesar's tribute tax (Mt. 22:15-22; Mk. 12:13-27; Lk. 20:20-26). The passage closes with Jesus' familiar yet cryptic command, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk. 12:17 [RSV]).

Interpreters have disputed the meaning of the tribute passage throughout Christian history. At this point, disagreement is so widespread as to defy categorization. The application of principles of modern Biblical criticism to the tribute passage has yielded substantial insight, yet several basic questions concerning the passage remain largely unanswered: (1) What is the meaning of the preamble to the tribute tax question? (2) What is the significance of Jesus' request for a coin? (3) What authority underlies Jesus' cryptic command? (4) What is meant by "the things that are Caesar's," and, more importantly, by "the things that are God's"?

This essay differs from earlier approaches in that it seeks to interpret the tribute passage by systematically applying the insights of David Daube in the area of rabbinical rhetoric. As will be shown

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in detail, the passage exhibits certain features found in the rabbinical literature of the New Testament period. When the passage is analyzed with these features in mind, answers to the unresolved questions regarding the passage quickly emerge.

II. The Legal, Halakhic Nature of the Tribute Tax Question

In Matthew and Mark, the question regarding the payment of tribute to Caesar is located within a section containing a series of four questions asked of Jesus (Mt. 22:15-46; Mk. 12:13-37). The order of the questions is the same in both gospels: (1) "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (2) If the first of seven brothers marries a woman and dies before they have children, and the second does the same, and so on, for all seven brothers, whose wife will she be at the time of the resurrection? (3) Which is the greatest commandment? (4) If David called the Messiah "Lord," how can Jesus be David's son?

The evangelists' gathering of questions on these four topics would seem to call for an explanation, for the topics appear to be logically unrelated, and there are textual indications that the four questions were not all posed on the same historical occasion.4

The format does, however, closely resemble "a fourfold scheme with which the first-century Rabbis were familiar."5 As evidence for the existence of the scheme in the New Testament era, Daube notes, "[T]he Talmud reports the Alexandrians to have put to R. Joshua ben Hananiah—a leading Rabbi in the half-century following the destruction of the Temple—twelve questions of four kinds, i.e. three of each kind."6 First, the Alexandrians posed "three questions of hokma, 'wisdom.' These are halakhic questions, concerning points of law."7 Next were three questions of haggadha. While it is difficult to specify the precise meaning of haggadha, this category would include historical matters, moral issues, general

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4 Luke has gathered only questions (1), (2) and (4) together, presenting question (3) elsewhere (Lk. 20:20-44; Lk. 10:25-28). In addition, "both in Matthew and Mark—though admittedly not in Luke—question (4) begins by a fresh description of audience or place." Daube, The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism, p. 158. Therefore, Daube concludes, "That the four questions in fact date from the same historical occasion is highly improbable." Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 159.

7 Ibid.