

# By What Authority?

*Christmas Reflections on the Same Question Asked by the Poet,  
“What Child is This?”*

**Luke 20:1** One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up

**2** and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.”

**3** He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me,

**4** was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”

**5** And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’

**6** But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”

**7** So they answered that they did not know where it came from.

**8** And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

**9** And he began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while.

**10** When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

**11** And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed.

**12** And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out.

**13** Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’

- 14** But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.'
- 15** And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?
- 16** He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!"
- 17** But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written:  
" 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?"
- 18** Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."
- 19** The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people.
- 20** So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.
- 21** So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.
- 22** Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"
- 23** But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them,
- 24** "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's."
- 25** He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."
- 26** And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.

**Luke 20:1-26**

# What Child Is This?

What Child is this, who, laid to rest,  
On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?  
Why lies He in such mean estate,  
Where ox and ass are feeding?

These are [the questions asked](#) by William Chatterton Dix, author of the famous poem. Born in Bristol, England in 1837, Dix was not a clergymen, as were so many other famous hymn writers. Instead, he was a businessman—manager of a marine insurance company in Glasgow. He had no business writing such poetry. Or did he?

In 1865, Dix had been [stricken](#) with a severe illness which saw him [bedridden](#) and suffering from severe [depression](#). He nearly died, but God had mercy on him. As he was recovering, he spirit was renewed. He read the Bible “comprehensively” and started writing many poems.<sup>1</sup>

In this, perhaps his most famous, he rhetorically asks the question, “[Who is this child?](#)” So meek and mild, he’s nothing

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<sup>1</sup> This is all from the *Wikipedia* page “[What Child Is This?](#)” Last accessed Dec 11, 2023.

special to our eyes. He sleeps in his mother's lap. He lies in a manger surrounded by grazing animals. Shepherds come to see him. Angels sing to greet him. But men do not recognize him for who he is. For we do not expect God to come like this. It makes no sense. God is All Glory, All Power, All Knowledge, All Honor. To come like this is the definition of shame, weakness, ignorance, and disgrace. This is what men are, not gods. Thus, Dix's question is one that has been asked by many. **Some have seen the truth. Others have refused it.**

## Luke 20:1-26 with Some Context

This is where we find the “**chief priests and the scribes with the elders**” (**Luke 20:1**) in our story today. Not at his birth, mind you, but near his death. Jesus is “**teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel**” to them. **Just think of it.** Only a handful of days before he knows he will be put to death by the same people, and he's right there **giving them the gospel.** What kind of a man is this?

That's precisely what the scribes all wanted to know. Their question is, “**Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority**” (2). In other

words, who is this, be he the child in a manger or the man entering Jerusalem. What things? The nearest context is Jesus **clearing the money-changers** out of the temple. Who would even have the right to do such a thing? But Jesus had cited the Scripture that actually already explained his authority. *His* house would be a house of prayer. His house? Just who does this guy think he is?

**Luke 20:1-26** contains **three stories** that deal with **this question of authority** and each in its own way answers the question, who is this? But they aren't straight forward answers like you might think you would get to such a question. Rather, Jesus knows that these men are trying to trap him. So **the first and last story** show us the brilliant wisdom of Jesus in answering their questions. Rather than just explain it to them (they wouldn't believe him anyway), *he* asks *them* a question back in each one. As the Proverb says, "**Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes**" (**Prov 26:5**).

**The middle story** contains **a parable**. This parable is aimed directly at these wicked men and it left them speechless and enraged. At its end, he gives them one of the most oft quoted OT verses found in the NT. At its heart is **a stone**,

a stone that crushes those who don't understand that our poet's question is rhetorical. **This child is the Stone the builders have rejected**, a stone that breaks those who look into the face of Jesus but deny the reality that is before them. That's terrifying.

## By What Authority? (Luke 20:1-8)

“One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel...” (Luke 20:1). While the stated **timeframe** does not necessitate that this happened on the Sunday–Wednesday that Jesus was in Jerusalem after the triumphal entry, this is almost certainly when it happened. The first half of the last week of Jesus' life seems to be spent **mostly in the temple** area doing exactly what Luke says here.

“The chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, ‘Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority’” (1-2). Perhaps they asked this later in the week and maybe Jesus had done other things besides enter into Jerusalem on a donkey and overthrow money changers. But this is the most immediate context, and as I said a moment ago, he had quoted to

them Isaiah calling this “his” house. You can imagine, then, that **this is no innocent question**. This is a trap. If he lies, he proves himself to have no authority and they can arrest him. If he tells the truth, they can bring him up on charges of blasphemy and arrest him. They know full well who he has been claiming to be these last three years. **Beware** when people are trying to **trap you in questions that are no-win situations**.

Learn from the Master himself how to be **wise as serpents and innocent as doves**. Jesus doesn’t give them the answer they were looking for. “**He answered them, ‘I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?’**” (3-4). Now, John has been dead for quite a while, and his ministry was mostly up north, so why bring up John here and now?

In part, it is because **he was well-known**. Even Josephus writes about him, saying that many Jews thought the destruction of Herod’s army later on came as punishment “**of what Herod had done against John, who is called the Baptist**” (Josephus, *Wars* 18.116). In doing this, he clearly would have gathered a crowd and that’s something he needed at the

moment. “*He’s talking about John,*” come the whispers. “*Let’s go listen to this one.*”

But it’s more than that. “They discussed it with one another saying, ‘If we say, “from heaven,” he will say, “Why did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From man,” All the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet’” (5-6). Isn’t that interesting? It’s essentially the same thing they were forcing him to answer. If Jesus is from man, then he has no authority and they can arrest him. If he is from heaven, then he is a blasphemer. Jesus just turned the tables on them.

But it’s worse now for them. The people actually believed John and the Pharisees had been a part of having *him* arrested. *Jesus had caught them.* As Ephraim said, “His word pressured them in such a way that they were forced to confess that they had not believed in John” (Ephraim the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron* 16.17). The Background Commentary explains, “Everyone recognized that God could raise up a prophet as his mouthpiece to indict both king and priest of corruption and sin ... If these leaders admit that John was a prophet—as the people believe (Luke



20:6)—they should submit to his indictment of their corrupt leadership.”<sup>2</sup>

They didn’t and they wouldn’t do that though, because like their fathers, **they hated God’s prophets**, which we will see soon enough shortly. Prophets are almost always hated, because **they speak truth in the midst of an entire world full of lies**, lies that *everyone* has invested themselves heavily into believing—and not just those who tell them but also those who listen to them and believe them and put into practice. And if you are invested in a lie, the last thing you want to do is admit the truth, because the consequences, or at least *imagined consequences* will be too painful to confront. That’s why people hate prophets.

This is **the problem with hatred**. It clouds the mind, dulls the vision, hardens the heart, and destroys the will to do what is right. It causes people to listen to things they should not, to believe things they should not. Pride gets in the way, and the only thing it can do is get worse unless there is a drastic change of mind and repentance. It’s why we see so much tension in the world, in the Middle East, in Washington DC, in so many churches, and families, and marriages,

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<sup>2</sup> **Mark Strauss**, Luke,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 1, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 471.

certainly not exclusively but especially in the last three years of almost nothing but lies and hatred from our so-called leadership. It's not like the Pharisees are the only ones. I'm getting ahead of myself a few days, when everyone will turn on Jesus and collectively put him to death. But it's worth considering even here, because apart from the grace of God, no one is immune from these things.

They answered **the only way** that non-repentance can when it knows it will get caught. We do “**not know where it came from**” (7). *Liars*. Everyone knew they were lying, but they didn't care. What else could they do? Humble themselves and follow the King?

**Jesus' trap** was effective and the story ends with him answering, “**Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things**” (8). You see, **they already knew** by what authority he claimed to do all things. The Gospels are replete with this. “**All things have been handed over to me by my Father**” (**Luke 10:22**). “**The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand**” (**John 3:35**). It's not like Jesus has never told them this very answer.

So they weren't actually trying to get an answer. **They were trying to get him to incriminate himself**. Wisdom does

not say to always answer its accuser directly. But neither did Jesus lie. Instead, he held them to the standard they were using against him. If they did not have to answer, then why should he? He's playing by their rules. And **he beat them**. He always beat them!

## The Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9-18)

The so-called **Parable of the Wicked Tenants** comes on the heels of this exchange and as the sandwich between the two trapping stories. “**And he began to tell the people this parable...**” (**Luke 20:9**). Get the picture in your head. Jesus is in the temple precinct. It is a huge place that can fit many thousands of people. He has surely drawn a crowd from the previous exchange. It clearly isn't just him and these evil leaders of Israel.

I can picture it in my mind. With a smirk and sideways nod of disdain at their sheer hypocrisy and taking a deep breath, **Jesus turns to crowds** and explains to them what they had just witnessed. And yet, it was in the form of a parable, a different kind of non-answer answer, just like what they had seen. For God spoke to the people in parables so that

they might ever be hearing but never perceiving. He couldn't suddenly just turn to them and admit the very thing he had refused to tell the priest and scribes!

“A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while” (9). Just here, we need to know about an OT image. It would have been one of the best known images to the Jews. A main place it is found is **Isaiah 5**:

1 Let me sing for my beloved  
my love song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.

2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
and he looked for it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.

3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and men of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard.

4 What more was there to do for my vineyard,  
that I have not done in it?

In this song of Isaiah, Israel is the vineyard and God is the owner. So as soon as Jesus starts to give this parable, it is almost certain that people would have been thinking about this. In Jesus' parable, it will become clear that the "man" is God. But what is the vineyard and who are the tenants?

Continuing with Jesus, "When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed" (Luke 20:10). Whoever the tenants are, they have quickly forgotten the owner. Not only have they forgotten him, but they clearly hate him, for he sends a servant to take some of the fruit of his own vineyard, and they beat him and force him to go back without any fruit!

Jesus' story continues, "And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed" (11). And again, "And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out" (12). Three times, same result, but the language gets increasingly more gruesome. At some point, the definition of insanity (doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result) might be expected to set in. All the more when you read in Matthew's version that after the third, "Again he sent other

servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them” ([Matthew 21:36](#)).

But it isn't insanity that is in the mind of the owner. It is persistence rooted in pride and love; it is his vineyard after all! So, “The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him’” ([Luke 20:13](#)). Now, don't think here that Jesus is teaching you systematic theology about God's knowledge. As Calvin says, “Strictly speaking, indeed, this thought does not apply to God; for He knew what would happen, and was not deceived by the expectation of a more agreeable result; but it is customary, especially in parables, to ascribe to Him human feelings” ([Calvin, Commentary on Matthew 21:37](#)).

In Luke, we've heard “beloved son” only one time previously: at [Jesus' baptism](#) ([Luke 3:22](#)).<sup>3</sup> That's interesting, because Jesus has just brought up [John the Baptist](#). He's the one who baptized Jesus, and many of them saw it happen and even heard the voice from heaven say it. As the Son, Jesus has all authority from the Father. So this parable continues the idea of his authority. And the “beloved son” now ties the two stories together. Jesus is answering their question

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<sup>3</sup> We find it in Matthew and Mark also at the Transfiguration ([Matt 17:5](#); [Mark 12:6](#)). In Luke's account of the Transfiguration, he is “My son, my Chosen One...” ([Luke 9:35](#)).

through this parable. He has authority because he is God's beloved Son.

Amazingly, **Isaiah 5:1** begins, “Let me sing for *my beloved ... my beloved has a Vineyard.*” Is this connection merely a **co-incidence**? Do you think anyone else would have seen it? Are we learning in Isaiah about the Father and Son? What do you suppose the people all thought was going to happen in Jesus story, let alone in real life? Let's continue.

“But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours,’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (**20:14-15a**). Matthew Poole is spot on in his interpretation here.

Our Lord here prophesied his own death by the means of these wicked priests, and so both lets them know that he was **not ignorant** of what was in their hearts, and they had been already (as we heard before) taking counsel about, by which they might again have concluded that he was the Son of God, and one who knew their hearts; and he also lets them know, that they should not surprise him, and that he was not afraid of them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> **Matthew Poole**, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 101.

We will see in a moment whether or not the scribes understood what Jesus was saying.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Jesus asks, “**What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?**” (15b). It's a rhetorical question, and Jesus does not wait for them to give an answer. But what do you think their it might have been? Everyone should already know it. I think the people would have said that they deserve to be punished quite severely, all the more if they understood that what the vineyard was.

Jesus in fact answers this way, at first. “**He will come and destroy those tenants...**” (16). But then he adds something. “*... and give the vineyard to others.*” At this point, we need to ask whether the vineyard is the same as it was for Isaiah. **Is it Israel or not in Jesus' parable?** The NT answer is yes and no. **Yes**, he is speaking about Israel *in some sense*. But Romans 9-11 explains that “**not all Israel is Israel**” (Rom 9:6). Nor has it ever been.

There are two Israels. One is biological. Jesus is **not** talking here about giving *biological* ancestry to someone else. That's not even possible. Jews will always be Jews just like any other national group of people. But he is talking about



giving *the promises of the covenant* to someone else. He is talking about giving **the title “Israel”** to Gentiles—those who will trust in his name—True Jews, True Circumcision, a Royal Priesthood, the Israel of God. It is a spiritual, not physical handing over. And this is a kind of foreshadowing of *Luke II—The Acts of the Apostles* when this is precisely what will happen.

This was all in accord with **the prophecies to Abraham** himself, that he would be the father of many nations. And one need not be taken out of the vineyard if they were Jewish, as all of the Apostles attest. For they were all Jews and were in fact True Jews. Many Jews were and are saved. The promise is **to all God has called**, first for the Jew, then for the Gentiles. But this takes us too far afield to say any more for today.

The people respond **aghast**. “**When they heard this, they said, ‘Surely not!’**” (**Luke 20:16b**). Give the vineyard to someone else? I believe this is the unanimous response of the scribes *and the people* together. And I know many people today, even Christians, who feel the same response. “No, all Jews are God’s chosen people,” they say, not understanding the distinctions made here. None of them thought such a thing could be. And yet, let us listen to the rest of Isaiah’s song.

When I looked for it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?

5 And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it shall be trampled down.

6 I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and briers and thorns shall grow up;  
I will also command the clouds  
that they rain no rain upon it.

7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts  
is the house of Israel,  
and the men of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
and he looked for justice,  
but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness,  
but behold, an outcry!

At the very least, the people should have known that **judgment was deserved**, not only the tenants, but the people. For

this was not only predicted by Isaiah; it came true, as Jeremiah in particular explains so well throughout his book. As Strauss summarizes, “When the vineyard fails to produce fruit, the owner takes away its protection and allows invaders—the Assyrians in Isaiah’s context—to overwhelm and destroy it. It is a parable of impending judgment,”<sup>5</sup> just as Jesus’ is.

But Jesus’ story goes beyond Isaiah’s. For Isaiah did not talk here about the Beloved Son. And Jesus has now predicted that the unthinkable would occur. They would not merely attack the servants; they would put the vineyard’s owner’s son to death! Clearly, none of them understood this, or they would not have been so quick to judge the owner as so capricious and heartless. They were all about ready to be part of the same thing. “Israel’s rejection of her Messiah will result in her destruction, and Israel’s salvation blessings will pass on to others.”<sup>6</sup>

But Jesus is not finished. “But he looked directly at them” (17). What must that stare have been like? He knew what the leadership was planning. And he knew that every single person there would in one way or another, just a few

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<sup>5</sup> Strauss, 471.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 471–472.

days hence, be part of **putting him to death**. Do you think he jumped right in? Do you think he paused and looked around, knowing everyone in that crowd by name?

He quotes **Psalm 118:22**. “**What then is this that is written: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’**” (17b). What’s remarkable about this is that just a few verses back, the people were singing hosannas to the king of David as they ushered him into the city with shouts *from this very same psalm* (vs. 26). Now, Jesus takes everyone a couple verses back and tells about a **prophecy of a stone**.

Luke 20:18	Isaiah 8	Daniel 2
<p>Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”</p>	<p>14 And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.</p> <p>15 And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”</p>	<p>34 As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.</p> <p>44 And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever,</p> <p>45 just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.”</p>

He seems to interpret the prophecy with bits from **Isaiah 8:14-15** and **Dan 2:34, 44-45** (among others).<sup>7</sup> “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (**Luke 20:18**). **Scripture interpreting Scripture**. It’s hardly a Protestant invention.

The idea of a **rejected stone** has close similarities to a **rejected king** (**1Sam 8:7**). God told Samuel that *the people had rejected him as king. Therefore, obey their voice and make Saul their king. We’ll see how well they like that.*

**The cornerstone** is the first stone laid by which the entire structure is measured and fit together. If it’s off on its precise measurements, the entire structure will be off. The people think to themselves that this stone is crooked, not cut at 90°. Perhaps it has cracks in it or blemishes. Maybe it has weaknesses and will be destroyed by too much weight. Whatever the case, they reject this stone in favor of another. **But that stone was Christ**. He was their king in the OT whom they rejected, and he is the Stone of the NT whom they are about to put to death.

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<sup>7</sup> **David W. Pao** and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 362-65.

It's an interesting idea that a **giant stone, discarded, could become a stumbling stone**. Hard to move, it is set aside but not removed entirely. Then, as construction continues, workers continually fall over it, not seeing where they are walking. But it's an even more interesting idea that **it can fall on others!** This is where Daniel comes in. For the seer sees a stone that becomes a mountain that rushes downhill crushing all that gets in its way. It's like putting the cornerstone on some high cliff's edge, only to see it topple to the bottom where a large crowd is gathered to see the achievement.

**Jesus is the Cornerstone**, and this Scripture will be used in Acts and Ephesians and Peter and other places to tell you that *God has not rejected* the stone that builders have. He takes the very same stone and starts making a new temple out of it. It becomes the cornerstone, one that men do not cherish or even understand unless they have the eyes of faith. This new temple is **Christ's church**, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it—even if they should put him to death.

We learn at the end of this parable that, **“The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people” (Luke 20:19)**. **Did they**

understand what he had said? This verse is loaded with irony. They understood that he had spoken against them. And yet, they sought to put him to death, the very thing the parable said that they would do! And thus, they utterly failed to understand anything he had told them. All they saw was that they were being made fun of and it had to come to an end before their own power did. Enough is enough.

## Taxes to Caesar (Luke 20:20-26)

It is into this that we come to our last story. It is the famous exchange about paying taxes to Caesar. It parallels in a remarkable way the first story about Jesus' authority. "So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor" (Luke 20:20). This is the playbook of all who deal treacherously with those under their care. The word "spy" ("enkathetos") means someone hired to lie in wait.<sup>8</sup> This was a deliberate premeditated costly war these leaders of Israel

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<sup>8</sup> Strauss, 473.

were now waging. And its warnings ring through the proverbial corridors of time. **Anyone who trusts a corrupt government that continues to lie** to them at every turn should know better. People who pretend to be sincere and lie to your face without batting an eye. It's breathtaking in its sociopathy. **There's absolutely no conscience left in people like this.**

The purpose is **to trap Jesus**, which is precisely what they were trying to do in the first story. Why? So that they could **find an excuse to bring him before a tribunal** on charges of sedition as so many others have been who came before.

**The vipers** hatched their plan and this is what it was. They asked him, **“Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God”** (21). Do you hear the **sweet-talking, schmoozing**, nerve of these people? It's like every person who ever goes on “Meet the Press,” or as Steve Taylor called it forty years ago, *“Meat the Press.”*

**In a ninety-floor Manhattan address  
lives a watchdog called the National Press  
and around his collar's written the line  
"The Protector Of Our Hearts And Minds"**



Hark! Hark! The dog will bark  
and we believe this hierarch  
but read between the lines and see  
this dog's been barking up the wrong tree  
Meat The Press<sup>9</sup>

The other Gospels are worth quoting on this same verse. Matthew, “Teacher, we know that *you are true* and teach the way of God truthfully, and *you do not care about anyone’s opinion*, for you are *not swayed by appearances*” (Matt 22:16), an ironic remark given that they just said to have feared the people rather than God. Mark, “Teacher, we know that *you are true* and *do not care about anyone’s opinion*. For you are *not swayed by appearances*, but *truly teach the way of God*” (Mark 12:14). You couldn’t do anything more to get on a fool’s good side than lie through your teeth with those kinds of words.

It's called *flattery* and the Bible speaks much of it. “For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they *flatter* with their tongue” (Ps 5:9). “Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with *flattering* lips and a double heart they speak. May the Lord

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<sup>9</sup> Steve Taylor, “Meat the Press,” *Meltdown*, Sparrow (1984).

cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts” (12:2-3). Beware the serpent’s tongue or people who mean to destroy you. Beware even more of letting your own tongue become the serpent’s.

On to their question and Jesus’ reply. “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” (Luke 20:22). It then tells us that Jesus “perceived their craftiness...” (23a). Jesus is no fool. Craftiness is the word *panourgia*. It comes from the word *pan* (“all”) and *erg* (“to work”). So it is literally “all-working.” However, Pan is the name of the evil satyr god who plays the flute and created *panic* (terror) in people. The range of negative meaning in the dictionaries goes from craftiness to trickery to cunning to villainy. It seems entirely plausible that the word also comes from this god, giving it a supernatural evil origin. This is not just bad, this is inspired satanic evil.

So what’s with the question? It seems to be referring especially to the poll tax paid directly to Rome, and not to local property taxes or customs taxes. It was a heavy burden to pay these taxes, and most Jews hated it. Josephus describes how, under the governorship of Coponius (6–10 AD), the insurrectionist Judas of Galilee “incited his countrymen to

revolt, upbraiding them as cowards for consenting to pay tribute to the Romans and tolerating mortal masters, after having God for their Lord.”<sup>10</sup>

So what’s the trap? It’s another no-win. “If Jesus told people to go ahead and pay the tax, many Jews would consider him a traitor to the cause of his people.”<sup>11</sup> And it is the people whom they feared, so this was an attempt to get them to turn on him. But, “If Jesus told people *not* to pay the tax, however—as the leaders probably hoped—he would be guilty of subverting the Roman government. Then they would be able to haul him before the governor and accuse him of being an insurrectionist.”<sup>12</sup> That’s truly cunning, worthy of the children of the devil.

But never try to fool the Creator of the Universe. Because he knew their hearts and plans he responded shrewdly himself. “Show me a denarius” (Luke 20:24). This is a coin worth about a day’s wages. It bore the image of emperor Tiberius at the time. It said on it, “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.”

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<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.1 §118. For tribute to Rome in general see *J.W.* 1.7.6 §154; idem, *Ant.* 14.10.6 §§202–3. In Strauss, 473.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 365.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



Both the image and the title were abhorrent to the Jews, for they clearly went against the Law of Moses. How ironic it is then that they all happen to have them tucked away in their own pockets!

And they had him one. Again, *I can imagine Jesus playing this out a little*. It brings a little dramatic tension to the moment. He takes it. He looks at it, inspecting both sides, acting like he has no idea what he's going to say. Rubbing his chin, maybe a couple of squints of his eyes, looking a little lost, playing up the moment.

*“Whose likeness and inscription does it have?”*

*How could he not know that? They said, “Caesar’s.”*

Then, without missing a beat, he hands it back and simply says, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:25). I absolutely love this answer and have thought about how genius it is many times. On the surface, it affirms Roman authority, doesn’t it? And this is biblical. Eccl 8:2 says, “Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him.” And yet, is also very clearly affirms God’s authority. And it is God who rules the kings of the earth (Isa 40:23; Dan 4:17; etc.).

In this way, we return to that central theme of authority that we discussed in the first two stories. And yet now it is ambiguous. On the other hand, his answer allows someone to say, “The Bible commands us to obey our government,” citing passages like Romans 13:1-7. So that person could say that Jesus is telling you to pay your taxes. On the other, his answer also allows someone else to say, “Since everything belongs to God, nothing belongs to Caesar.” And that person could take away that Jesus was not against rebelling against Rome. Both are justified in their interpretation, and that’s precisely the point. It’s a complete non-answer answer. It truly is genius.

Effectively, **Jesus did not answer them at all**. And yet, **he completely answered them** at the same time. All because these forked-tongued vipers were trying to trap him and arrest him and have him crucified. *Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be right in his own eyes*. Jesus knows true authority, and he always submits to the authority of his Father. He did exactly what was called for in a situation like this.

So the story concludes, “**And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent**” (26). **He shut the fools up**. And just how do you suppose they took that in their hearts?

## What Man Is This?

In these three stories, we have **seen the question**, “**By what authority do you do these things?**” We have seen Jesus escape their trap, and answer them all back with **a parable** that both answered their question and predicted the very thing that was going to happen to him. We then saw another trap question that Jesus escaped with the greatest of ease.

And it leaves me asking that same question. **What kind of man does this? Who is this guy?**

This was the question Dix asked rhetorically about the Christ-child. Now it is time to think about his answer.

This, this is Christ, the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary!  
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading.  
So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,  
Come, peasant, king to own Him.  
The King of kings salvation brings;  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

The song directs you to **praise this child who is King**, this man who is the King of kings. It bids you to **bow down** and worship him, be it Christmas morning or the next day or the day after that. Once you hear the good news and reject it, the only other alternative is to have that hardened heart full of hatred that is embodied by the wicked scribes and Pharisees who ended up putting Jesus to death.

Yet what they did was planned of God from of old. They did nothing that he had not already ordained to be. And their plans came to nothing. Because this little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger came not merely to be with us, but *to die for us*—we who put him to death by our own sin—and to be raised from the dead, that he might give life to his people and bring forgiveness of their sins.

May yours be *a heart that receives the King* and sees him enthroned in your life. For this is the gospel of Jesus. The good news that is hidden behind all those things that causes men to ask such questions, “*Who is this One we sing to. Who is this One we bow to? Who is this one we worship?*” You have heard the answer. Go out from here in faith, with hope and love attending all that you do.

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Luke 20	Matthew 21-22	Mark 11-12
1 One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up	23 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching,	27 And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him,
2 and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.”	and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”	28 and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?”
3 He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me,	24 Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.	29 Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.
4 was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”	25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”	30 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.”
5 And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’	And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’	31 And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’
6 But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”	26 But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”	32 But shall we say, ‘From man?’—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.

7 So they answered that they did not know where it came from.	27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."	33 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."
8 And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."	And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."	And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."
9 And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while.	33 "Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.	12:1 And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country.
10 When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.	34 When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. 35 And the tenants took his servants and beat one,	2 When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. 3 And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.
11 And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed.	killed another,	4 Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully.
12 And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out.	and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.	5 And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.
13 Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.'	37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'	6 He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'
14 But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.'	38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'	7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'
15 And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?	39 And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"	8 And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. 9 What will the owner of the vineyard do?
16 He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!"	41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."	He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.
17 But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?"	42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"	10 Have you not read this Scripture: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; 11 this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"
	43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its	

18 Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”	fruits. 44 And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”	
19 The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people.	45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. 46 And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.	12 And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.
20 So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.	22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. 16 And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians,	13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.
21 So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.	saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.	14 And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.
22 Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?”	17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”	Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?”
23 But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them,	18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?	15 But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them,
24 “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar’s.”	19 Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.	“Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”
25 He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”	20 And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 21 They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” 22 When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.	16 And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s.” 17 Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marveled at him.
26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.		