

How can Iron Age texts possibly be relevant in the Internet Age? Whatever people think the texts once ‘meant’, it is mostly irrelevant to the ‘meanings’ that we ascribe to them now—or the fresh insights we believe we possess in our own day.

Yet in counter-point to such recalcitrance, the reason why we engage in a study of the history of the New Testament is because of the conviction that Jesus and the apostles constitute the basis for normative Christianity. This ‘normativity’ emerges from the belief that God has revealed himself in the historical events behind the New Testament, in the writings that make up the New Testament, and in the experiences evoked by the New Testament (see ‘Emails from the edge: NT history’). This belief grows out of the ineradicable Christian conviction, held from very early times, that being a Christian means living, believing, and behaving in some sort of continuity with the New Testament (and the Old Testament!). This belief gained additional momentum as a result of the Protestant Reformation, when the principle of *sola scriptura* was articulated, placing the Bible in the position of supreme authority. Reading the New Testament, it has always been felt within Protestantism, is where the Christian begins, and in doing so he or she is equipped, challenged, reinforced, and given a sound basis for belief and life. If that is the case, then study of the New Testament in the context of the early church is a necessary part of Christian discipleship.

EMAILS

from the edge



From: Alan_Daley@aol.com
To: Professor Dana Schuler
Date: Sat, 16 Jan 2016 at 10:02 p.m.
Subject: NT history

Dear Prof.,

I'm a bit confused about the paper you told us to write: ‘How Does Knowing Historical Background Help Us to Understand Mark 12.14–17?’ I mean, when Jesus says, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’ (KJV), surely he means Christian folks should simply be honest and pay their taxes. What else is there to understand? Sorry, but I just don’t see the point of the question.

Thanks
AD

From: Professor Dana Schuler
To: Alan_Daley@aol.com
Date: Mon, 18 Jan 2016 at 2:25 p.m.
Subject: Re: NT history

Dear Alan,

Sorry to disappoint you, but this is one passage where knowing some historical background is crucial.

First, remember that the question is actually a trap set for Jesus by the Pharisees and Herodians, not a sincere question about whether Jews (let alone Christians) should be upright tax-payers. How does the trap work? Well, if you read Josephus (*Ant.* 18.23; *Wars* 2.118; 7.410) you'll see that some zealous Galileans had a motto, 'No king but God', and since paying taxes to Caesar meant recognizing him as king, paying taxes was in fact a type of blasphemy or cowardly betrayal of their religion. So when Jesus is asked about paying taxes to Caesar, he's put in a Catch-22. If he says, 'Yes, pay them', Jesus will look like he's compromised and sold out. If he says 'No, don't pay them', then the Herodians can have him arrested on charges of sedition as forbidding the payment of taxes, which was an offence—precisely the claim they fabricated against Jesus at his trial (see Lk. 23.2).

Second, notice Jesus' response: he doesn't try to bluff his way through an answer. Instead, he requests a denarius, and asks, 'Whose image and inscription are on it?' (See attached image.) Now various coins were minted in Palestine, mostly without imperial images, usually with floral designs; only Pontius Pilate printed coins depicting pagan cultic utensils (see Kindler 1973, 37–8, 94–103). But this denarius is probably a Tiberian tribute penny which had on one side an 'image' of Tiberius's bust with an inscription that read, 'Son of the divine Augustus'; then on the other side it said 'High priest', accompanied by a depiction of Tiberius's mother Livia posing as the goddess Roma. The rub is that if Caesar is 'divine', and if this is his image, then it is a violation of the second commandment (see Ex. 20.4; Dt. 5.8). In other words, Jesus is saying, you guys are carrying around pagan money which is an affront to our religion, so give the pagan king back his pagan money.

Third, perhaps there is even more to it. Perhaps Jesus is saying that Caesar should receive taxes because he should get EVERYTHING that he deserves, and he means everything!

Much like how the father of Judas Maccabaeus could urge his fellow-Judeans to ‘Pay back the Gentiles in full’—by which he meant violent retribution (1 Macc. 2.68)! So, far from acquiescing to the view that Jews or Christians should pay taxes, Jesus is being subversive, affirming a critique of pagan power over Israel, and avoiding the trap set for him.

Now do you see the value of historical background knowledge?

The grace be with you

Prof. Dana Schuler

When it comes to doing history, an emerging problem we have to wrestle with is that since the Enlightenment what counts as ‘history’ has been very much conditioned by purported ‘laws’ that have no place for God and (what has come to be called) the ‘supernatural’. (In earlier times the ‘supernatural’ was an extra dimension that enhanced the ‘natural’ world, not an alternative to it.) Consequently many historians are quite happy to write off ‘god’ and the description of his actions as the mythic husk that must be peeled away so that the historical kernel behind Christian origins can finally be exposed. As a result, many Christians are somewhat afraid of history, frightened that if we really find out what happened in the first century our faith might collapse. The problem is that without historical enquiry there is no check on Christianity’s propensity to remake Jesus, never mind the Christian ‘God’, in its own image. Equally, much Christianity is afraid of scholarly learning, and insofar as the Enlightenment programme was an anti-dogma venture, Christianity has often responded by retreating into the safe space of a ‘confession’, a self-reinforcing church circle. But, granted that learning without love is sterile and dry, enthusiasm without learning can easily become blind arrogance. Again, much Christianity has been afraid of reducing a ‘supernatural’ faith to rationalist categories. But, as I have just suggested, the sharp distinction between the ‘supernatural’ and the ‘rational’ *is itself a product of Enlightenment thinking*, and to emphasize the ‘supernatural’ at the expense of the ‘rational’ or ‘natural’ is itself to capitulate to the Enlightenment worldview at a deeper level than if we were merely to endorse, rather than marginalize, a post-Enlightenment rationalist programme. Thankfully there is a better way for us to be proper New Testament historians.

There is no time to offer a full-sized philosophy of historiography, or to provide a detailed map of historical methodology.



Tiberian denarius
Jay King Collection