

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 24, Year A (track one)

### First Reading

Exodus 33:12–23

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” (ESV)

### Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we

proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### Matthew 22:15–22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 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.” When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

In searching out articles concerned with this week’s reading from Exodus 33, I found fairly little. I did however find one that helped me get my fingers around the awkwardness of this conversation between Moses and Yahweh. When we read it, it sounds as though neither is really listening to what the other is saying, so that they “talk at cross purposes.” This has apparently led some scholars to propose that what we have here are two different sources/stories rather poorly combined into one. In this paper by William Irwin, though, I found a credible and satisfying explanation that valued, rather than discarded this awkwardness as unhelpful.

Irwin has identified two different “currents” in verses 12-17 that make sense in and of themselves. In the first he finds: (going back to include verse one so as to make sense of Moses’ quote)

Yhwh spoke to Moses, “Go up from here, you and the people that you led up from the land of Egypt to the land...” (v1)

Moses said to Yhwh:, “You say to me, ‘Lead this people up,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.” (v 12a)

He (Yhwh) said, “I will go in person and give you rest.” (v 14)

He (Moses) said, “If you do not go in person, do not make us go up from here.” (v 15)

In the second “current” Irwin includes:

Yet you have said: “I know you by name and you have found favor in my eyes.” Now if I have found favor in your eyes, let me know your ways, that I may know you, thereby finding favor in your eyes, and regard this nation as your people. (vv 12b-13)

...

How else, indeed, will it be known that I have found favor in your eyes, I and your people, except by your going with us so that we may be distinguished, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth? (v 16)

This world also that you have spoken I will do, because you have found favor in my eyes and I know you by name. (v 17)

Notice how each of those “currents” begins and ends with the same words. In the first, “Go up from here,” and in the second, “I know you by name.” (This literary device is called an *inclusio*.)

By wedging Moses’ second petition between his first one and God’s response to the first one, then having God deliver his response to the first, then the second, Irwin sees a technique he calls “delayed response.” That is, God accedes, almost playfully as to a friend, but with the delay God also reminds Moses who’s in charge. This way of reading the text gives purpose to the awkward combination of two requests from Moses and two answers from God.

The “delayed response” technique also gives us a handle on the dialogue that follows. Moses asks Yahweh to show him His glory. In His response to Moses, God barely mentions “glory” and does so only in passing near the end of His response. Again we have an *inclusio* framed by the word “glory.” God has agreed to Moses’ two earlier requests, both of which rested on quotations from what God had already said. Here, God is gracious, granting Moses a vision of His “goodness” but ultimately declining the petition, another “delayed response.”

Second Reading

Before dealing with the specific verses appointed for this week, I would like to deal with the letter as a whole. Keeping in mind the contingent nature of all Paul's correspondence, the question again becomes "What was the reason for the letter?" What were the concerns that he had that caused him to write it? By keeping this purpose of Paul's in view, it will help to prevent us from treating individual verses or paragraphs as something he intended for every Christian in every setting, as though he were writing a theology text and not a letter.

## Intro to Thessalonians

Paul is pretty clear that the immediate cause of his writing is Timothy's report about the Thessalonians. (3:6) Scholars have raised the question of whether or not Timothy brought with him a letter from Thessalonica to which Paul is responding directly, as he clearly does in some of his other correspondence, but I don't find in 1 Thessalonians the kind of specific quotation from a letter he's holding that we see elsewhere. It is enough that he has an immediate report from Timothy.

This report fills Paul's heart with joy, as he hears of their love and steadfastness, and the example they have become to other believers. But if that were all that he heard, one doubts that he'd have written the letter we have in our own hands. His primary concern seems to be the "affliction" (*thlipsis*) that the Thessalonians are undergoing and its effect on them. Paul's emphasis on the faith of the Thessalonians in the opening "thanksgivings" suggests to me that this effect is the shaking of that very faith. We can also see reflected in more than one place in the letter an additional concern, that there are some among the Thessalonian congregation who have ceased to work. Other, lesser issues can mostly be grouped under one or the other of these larger ones.

Before tackling these causes for the letter, we need to place the Thessalonian congregation in its own setting. That is, it is an entirely Gentile congregation. Unlike the congregation in Rome that included some Jewish converts and worshiped alongside other unconverted Jews, or the congregation in Galatia which was challenged by Jewish teachers who required of them that they also undergo conversion to Judaism, there is no hint that this congregation is challenged by questions of its relationship to Israel. This isn't to say that they were unaware of it, only that it wasn't a matter of worry for Paul. He doesn't actually mention his Jewish siblings in the letter, except as a parallel to the Greco-Roman culture from which the Thessalonians have been called.

And this Greco-Roman identity of the Thessalonian congregation becomes important when we study details of the letter because Paul makes use of many themes they'd have known from their own philosophers in the course of his writing. By these familiar forms Paul speaks to them in language that appeals to them, but by the way that he changes

them (sometimes startlingly), he draws deep contrasts between the lives they're called to and the lives from which they've come.

This, then, casts light on both the "affliction" theme and the "idleness" theme. First, the affliction they're dealing with is almost certainly harassment from their Gentile neighbors. The rejection of the emperor cult and all its practices would have been a cause for considerable ridicule. There is a clue to the kind of ridicule they endured in the letter, too. When Paul devotes a significant portion of chapter four to "those who have fallen asleep" we can deduce that the Thessalonians' faith in a Savior who apparently cannot save them from death might have been a source of taunt that really wounded. As a result, I believe that Timothy has reported that the faith of some members of the congregation may be shaken.

Then there was also a tradition among Gentile philosophers, most especially the Cynics, to forgo work entirely and devote oneself completely to the teaching of one's philosophy to the uneducated. By the philosopher's dedication to his task, his "deeds" became that which validated his teaching. We will see later how Paul turns that idea on its head. But it seems likely to me that some within the Thessalonian congregation had also decided to stop working to support themselves and give themselves entirely to preaching. (So the idleness is not simply a waiting for the *parousia*.)

This summarizes my understanding of the reason for Paul's letter and the methods he employs to accomplish his purpose.

On to the appointed verses!

As you've read before, Paul's opening thanksgivings serve as an introduction to the issues he wants to address later in the letter. It is no different here when he speaks of the Thessalonians work of "love and steadfastness." He points to that gracious quality of their life together that he hopes to strengthen by his letter against the social pressure/harassment they are currently experiencing. In the midst of these commendations of their love and steadfastness Paul also points to the faith of the congregation that has "gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything." The way that their steadfastness and faith are woven together indicates to me that the affliction they continue to suffer has begun to threaten that very faith.

He then goes on to bolster the very thing for which they are ridiculed, their difference from the Greco-Roman society in which they're embedded. Paul says that their chosenness by God is confirmed because the Gospel came to them "not only in word, but in power and in Holy Spirit." This is significant because of the way that it resembles and yet diverges significantly from the Cynic norm. The teaching of the Cynic is confirmed

because it comes to the hearer not only in word, but in the Cynics *deeds*. Paul claims an authority like (but greater than) the authority of the philosopher while basing that authority on God, not his own deeds.

In the same way, the theme of “imitation” is one that you’ll find among the philosophers. While some of them were reluctant to encourage that their followers imitate them, Paul encourages it. The Thessalonians have received Paul’s word “in much affliction.” This early reference to their suffering at their neighbors’ hands identifies what I think is the foremost and central issue facing the letter’s recipients, and Paul’s purpose in writing this letter of encouragement.

The final sentence of our reading for this week hints at what I think was one of the main sources of ridicule (and therefore threats to their faith), the fact that the salvation they had chosen to believe in wasn’t instantly manifest, that some of them had already died, and yet they waited for Jesus who had been *raised from the dead*. Paul’s glancing reference to “the wrath to come” may also speak to the Thessalonians growing anger with their neighbors while they wait for the Lord’s return.

#### Gospel Text

Our reading from Matthew this week encompasses the question of the legality of taxes paid to Caesar and Jesus cryptic response, “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God that which is God’s.” While researching this passage I came across a compelling article that placed the entire exchange within the realm of Rabbinic rhetoric. I’ll definitely link the entire article below for those of you who’d like to read it later.

In this article, David T. Owen-Ball suggests that the failure of scholars to achieve any kind of consensus on the proper interpretation of the question and Jesus’ answer lies in their failure to see it for what it is, an *halakhic* challenge by His interlocutors. First he takes note of the work of David Daube, who recognized that this question asked of Jesus is the first of four closely grouped questions exchanged between Jesus and His opponents. These questions include 1) The issue of taxes paid to Caesar, 2) The question concerning the woman married to seven brothers, 3) “Which is the greatest Commandment?” and 4) “If David called the Messiah ‘Lord’, how can he be David’s son?”

This grouping of questions bears close resemblance to a series of questions put by the Alexandrians to Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah (late first century) by the Hellenists as related in the Talmud. While there were twelve questions put to him, they were four groups of three questions, grouped by type. The four types of question were 1) questions of *halakha*, or “the way of walking under the law,” 2) questions of *haggadah*, more

general questions of interpretation and history, 3) questions of *boruth*, mocking questions, and 4) questions of *derekh 'eres*, questions regarding general principals for a successful and moral life.

While we have here only four questions rather than twelve and the ordering of the questions has changed, the similarity is too great to ignore. It seems likely that Matthew was familiar with this portion of the Talmud when he assembled the four questions in chapter 22.

That being so, it means that Matthew meant this exchange to have been understood as a question of *halaka* put to Jesus by the Pharisees. Two elements of *halakhic* interpretation are important here. First, *halakha* was only the province of the rabbi. Second, *halakha* was to be based on a text of the Torah, or, lacking that, the widely accepted teaching of another rabbi.

These two elements then govern how we are to understand the question put to Jesus and His response.

The first consideration then is the question of Jesus' authority, raised earlier in chapter 20. One was recognized as a rabbi only if one had been ordained by the laying on of hands by another rabbi. Jesus has earlier refused to answer for the source of His authority, so the prelude to the question, calling Him "Teacher," is a dig at His teaching, a hint that they consider Him a "false prophet" (one who teaches without proper ordination) through their insincere compliments. Nonetheless, they challenge Him to answer as a rabbi, to give an *halakhic* answer to the question of taxes paid to Caesar. The trap is clearly set, because Torah contains a clear warning from Moses against the use of one's wealth to serve other Gods. (Deut. 8:17-19) Jesus must either contradict Scripture or give them grounds to denounce Him to the Roman authorities.

But the exchange gets turned on its head. Jesus employs a technique that Owen-Ball calls "forensic interrogation." This pattern includes four elements: 1) The initial, hostile question, 2) a counter question by the rabbi, 3) an answer to the counter question that renders the questioners vulnerable, and 4) the use of that answer by the rabbi to refute the initial question. (This pattern he also identifies in early rabbinic literature.)

Jesus is asked for an *halakhic* answer to the question of taxes. He must give an answer that has the authority of Torah or at the very least, of the teaching of another well respected rabbi. His counter question is that concerning the image and the inscription on the coin. His answer, then, must rest on Torah, and it is this connection that I had missed until I read Owen-Ball's article.

First, the image on the coin. It bears Caesar's image. The simple answer from Torah would then be from Genesis 1:26, "Then God said, let us make (the) human in our own image, after our likeness." Humans as God's image-bearers is easy for us to recognize. The second element, that of the inscription, is less so. Nonetheless, Owen-Ball has identified a passage from that allows Jesus to rest His answer entirely on the authority of Torah. As he says, "Exodus 13:9 fits perfectly." "And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt."

This is the statute concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread that will be inscribed on the Israelites' hands and foreheads as a remembrance of God's saving acts. And it reinforces the idea that the children of Israel do indeed belong to God.

Owen-Ball goes on to suggest that while Jesus' answer turns the Pharisees' question upon themselves, it doesn't give us a clear answer to the question Christians have asked of it for centuries. "How do we deal with the demands of government, especially an unjust one?" For ages this text has been used to suggest that Jesus required Christians to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesars," to quietly accede to the demands of secular government. But if Jesus' answer says that "You belong entirely to God," then it raises questions about our obligation to render anything that is us or ours (coin as an emblem of our labor) to empire.