

Tribute Is Not Tax: Scripture Changes, Doctrine Changes

By R. Magnusson Davis

Behold, the days come (saith the Lord) that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Juda: not after the covenant that I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt — Jeremiah 31:31-32, 1537 Matthew Bible

The historical details of the gospel stories matter. To fudge them, lose them, or distort them, changes the message of the Bible and takes away from God's word.

New Testament teaching about the payment of tribute is such a detail. It has symbolic significance. 'Tribute' is not tax, but some modern translators have changed it to 'tax' or 'taxes.' Thus they have robbed us of the opportunity to understand the symbolism and, at the same time, enabled error.



What is tribute and why does it matter?

'Tribute' is a special levy paid by the ruler of a nation, or its people, to a foreign power. It is demanded as a sign of submission or for protection. It also sometimes refers to rent or homage paid by a vassal to his lord or sovereign. 'Tax,' however, is a different thing. We understand it as payment that is made to a (usually) domestic government without any element of homage; that is, it is not intended to meet any obligation of vassalage. See the primary definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary:¹

Tribute 1.a. A tax or impost paid by one prince or state to another in acknowledgement of submission or as the price of peace, security, and protection; rent or homage paid in money or an equivalent by a subject to his sovereign or a vassal to his lord.

Tax 1.a. A compulsory contribution to the support of government, levied on persons, property, income, commodities, transactions, etc., now at fixed rates, mostly proportional to the amount on which the contribution is levied.

Tribute presupposes subjugation or a duty of homage, and therein lies the rub.

When Jesus came to Israel, the Jews were required to pay tribute to Rome, their hated conqueror. Their fervent hope, their national hope, was that the Messiah would liberate them from this bondage. The coming Deliverer was expected to lead the restoration of Israel as a sovereign state in her promised homeland. This is classic Zionism, of course. It arises from a literal understanding certain Old Testament promises to the fathers as enduring promises of national or ethnic sovereignty (and fails to understand the enduring promise that was to the seed). The Jews believed that, as God's chosen people, they must have their own political and geographic kingdom on this earth, this side of heaven.

Therefore the widespread hope of the Jewish people before Jesus' first coming was for political emancipation and national sovereignty. It was wrong for them to be in a state of vassalage to a foreign power, because they were God's people and the beneficiaries of

his promises of nationhood. Political subjugation must end; tribute must end. This, they believed, was the substance of God's promises to Israel.

And so the Jews did not want to hear from the Messiah that they *should* pay tribute to Rome. In fact, to say such a thing could land a man in trouble. It was traitorous, it was unpatriotic, it was unJewish. Jesus' own disciples thought the Messiah would restore national sovereignty to Israel and abolish the duty to pay tribute. The evil Pharisees and Sadducees tried to ensnare Jesus on the issue, as we learn from Matthew 22:15-21:

The Pharisees went and took counsel, how they might tangle him in his words. And they sent to him their disciples with Herod's servants, saying, Master, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truly, neither mind any person, for you do not consider men's estate. Tell us therefore what you think: is it lawful to remit tribute to Caesar, or not?

Jesus perceived their wickedness and said, Why do you bait me, you hypocrites? Let me see the tribute coin. So they brought him a denarius. And he said to them, Whose image and superscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's. Then he said to them, Give therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and give to God that which is God's.²



The religious leaders hoped to trick Jesus into saying things that would earn him the wrath of the Jews or of the Romans. But he avoided the trap, and, by confirming that tribute was due to Caesar, showed that he was no Zionist. For the kingdom he came to inaugurate has nothing to do with worldly liberation, but spiritual; it is not of this world. This is the New Covenant, the promise of deliverance from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God and the life that is in Christ. Its citizens are the Jews that are "hid within," the Israel of God.³ And so Jesus refuted Zionism.

In short, he is the conqueror, and he has won for us an everlasting kingdom. It is to him that we owe the homage that is of real consequence. He told us to pay tribute to Caesar, and so we do, knowing that we are pilgrims in a strange country. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we are looking for our heavenly country, whose maker and founder is God.⁴

But such lessons cannot be built on the passage when the translators change 'tribute' to 'tax.'⁵ To do this takes away from the foundation a brick that enables us to understand the nature of the New Covenant. If I may mix metaphors, it then becomes easier to build straw upon the weakened foundation. Modern straw is that Jesus wants us to pay taxes and be good citizens. Yes, but no. And, more significantly, moderns have rebuilt the straw house of Zionism. They have fallen into errors that the English Reformers called "Jewish opinions" and "Jewish fables," seeking an earthly kingdom for the citizens of the earthly Israel. These errors obviously become easier to fall into, and more difficult to refute, when the Scriptures that refute them are changed.

There are three Greek words translated 'tribute' by Tyndale (and also in the KJV) that have been variously translated by moderns. Strong, in his Concordance, certainly raises issues with his definitions. However, I have no doubt that the Greek was used idiomatically in these passages to refer to tribute payments, and Tyndale knew and understood this.

Other Bible passages that teach about tribute and the Lord's kingdom

That the payment of tribute or suchlike is not a concern of the Israel that belongs to God (whether Jew or Gentile) is reiterated in other passages. The question of the lawfulness

of tribute arises in Mark 12:14 and Luke 23:2; Jesus' own disciples actually thought it might be unlawful to pay tribute, no doubt because it acknowledged submission to Rome and thus went contrary to the popular understanding of the covenant promises and the law. Jesus' answers were a light to understand the New Covenant. He also used the issue to teach about the freedom of God's people at Matthew 17:24-27:

And when they had come to Capernaum, men that collected the poll money came to Peter and asked, Does your teacher pay tribute? He said, Yes. And when he had come into the house, Jesus spoke first to him, saying, What do you think, Simon: from whom do the kings of the earth take tribute or poll money? From their children, or from others? Peter answered, From others. And Jesus said to him, Then the children are free. Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea and cast in your hook, and take the fish that first comes up. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a coin. Take it, and pay for me and you.

We may learn from this that the children of the Lord's kingdom are free, even though they should pay tribute to Rome. Theirs is another kingdom, and theirs is another king, one who is not "of the earth." (But some moderns have changed 'tribute' to 'temple-tax' here, which to my mind confounds the message even further, the temple being as much beloved by the Jews as Rome was hated.)

The apostle Paul also taught that tribute should be paid to Rome at Romans 13:7:

Romans 13:7-8 Give to all persons therefore that which is due to them: tribute to whom tribute belongs, custom to whom custom is due, fear to whom fear belongs, honour to whom honour pertains. Owe nothing to anyone, but to love one another. For he who loves another, fulfils the law.

Pay your earthly dues, says Paul, be they tax ('custom') or tribute, but, moreover, concern yourself with the dues of the everlasting kingdom, whose currency is love. We may pay homage to Caesar or to any earthly lord without murmuring, understanding that all power and all authority is ordained by God. We know also that what ultimately matters is the homage due to God, and this we may pay in our hearts anytime, anywhere, freely. For our Zion is a spiritual mount.

Modern Zionism

It was no accident that when the Messiah first came, the fervent hope of Israel was for national liberation. He came in the appointed time, and, except for the remnant who believed, he dashed the hopes of the Jewish people. He came to put down the old and establish the new. He told the disciples that not one brick of the temple would remain standing (M't 24:2). Paul explained that the ministration of the law was passing away, and the ministration of the Spirit would be far more glorious (2 Cor. 3). It must also be no accident that now the fervent hope of not only the Jewish people, but also many zealous Christians, is for the restoration of Israel as a sovereign state in her promised homeland. Christian Zionism, and even the adulation of the Jewish people as the chosen nation, is everywhere today, just as it was everywhere in Israel two thousand years ago. Now it is unChristian, and again unlawful, not to share the Zionism of the Jews. Perhaps this is a sign that the Lord's second coming is imminent. Only He knows.

In any case, the changes made to modern Bibles, often by Zionist translators, have enabled modern errors. The loss of the tribute lesson is only one brick chopped out of the foundation. Furthermore, new bricks are inserted, upon which other fables of a future golden age, whatever form they may take, have been erected by Zionists, dispensationalists, and pre- and postmillennialists. What all these fables have in common is that they

say better things lie ahead, because at least some of the New Covenant promises must yet be fulfilled on earth. One such new brick is at Revelation 10:6:

NMB (October Testament) And the angel that I saw standing upon the sea and upon the land lifted his hand up to heaven, and swore by him who lives forevermore, who created heaven and the things that are in it, and the sea and the things that are in it, that ***time shall be no more.***

NIV Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, ***“There will be no more delay!”***

From the Matthew Bible we learn that at the end of this age, when the Israel of God has been gathered from every nation and tongue, the Lord will come again, and time will be no longer. All will be finished. It is really very simple. The apostle Peter wrote:

The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which day the heavens shall perish with terrible noise, and the elements shall melt with heat, and the earth with the works that are in it shall burn (1 Peter 3:10).

However, the NIV revision – which is not due to a manuscript variance, but new doctrine – supports the idea of a future golden age on earth. This utopia is sometimes interpreted as a time at the end of this age, before the Lord returns. This is postmillennialism. It teaches that the Lord will return *after* a glorious millennium. In premillennialism, however, the Lord comes *first*, and then the glory time. The common thread in all this is that the best is yet to come. Therefore, at least insofar as premillennialism is concerned, the scriptures had to be changed to allow for time to continue after the Lord returns, so that the delayed promises may then be fulfilled. *Then* the twelve tribes will reign on the earth, or the Church, or the saints: whatever the wit of man or the devil may devise.

But it is all false.⁶ Teaching which denies that the promises *were fulfilled* in Christ Jesus effectively denies that he *has come* in the flesh. It is a subtle form of the antichristian lie that the apostle John warned of at 1 John 4:3. It denies his reign in the saints now, who are his body, his temple, his people. It neglects so great a salvation. It denies that this is the time the fathers longed for but did not see. It denies that this is the well-accepted time – all of which things were written by the apostles about this present age, these last days.⁷ It destroys or impairs our understanding of the New Covenant: behold, it destroys the gospel, the glad tidings that the best has now been given us in Christ Jesus.

But many believe that the fulfilment of the Lord’s promises has been delayed, and so they are still waiting – and as it was with the Jews, so also will their hopes be dashed. The Jews did not know the time of their visitation; neither do many Christians. They join with Zionism in a vain hope of an earthly kingdom.⁸ They deny that our King now reigns – who will reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. They deny that *now* is that well-accepted time, *now* is that well-favoured time.

A few small changes to the Scriptures, and what a great fire is kindled.

Conquering kings their titles take
From the foes they captive make;
Jesus by a nobler deed,
From the thousands he hath freed.
(*Victis sibi cognomina*, Hymn 491, Canadian Prayer Book)

© Ruth Magnusson Davis, Baruch House Publishing, 2018. Endnotes follow ...

¹ Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. 'Tribute' and 'Tax.' Accessed August 3, 2018.

² All New Testament Scripture quotations are from the October Testament, the New Testament of the New Matthew Bible, 2018 edition.

³ Romans 2:29, Galatians 6:16.

⁴ Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 11:14-16.

⁵ Some versions say 'imperial tax' or explain that the 'tax' was due to Rome. This is closer, but does not hit the mark. Also, when the meaning is not in the text itself, it is lost when the Bible is read aloud, or if the reader does not consult the notes, or in an unannotated version.

⁶ Utopia teachings, be they leftist, communist, Islamic, "Christian," or whatever, are all false. There is a very interesting parallel between the expectations of fundamentalist Muslims and those of Puritan postmillennialists: both groups – and this is a little understood but real fact – believe that there will be a golden age of their Church on earth, which will prepare the way for the return of Jesus. Of course, there are differences. For one, the Muslims teach that Jesus will destroy Christianity when he returns. There are also very ironic similarities, however. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the early Puritans tore down and destroyed crosses wherever they could, just as the Muslims have always done and still do, it being a symbol that both groups abhor.

⁷ Hebrews 2:3; 11:13, 39-40; 2 Corinthians 6:2. The Matthew Bible notes explain and make clear that "last days" means the entire period between Jesus' first and second comings.

⁸ This author is not anti-Semitic. Politically, she is pro-Israel. She simply believes the Bible when it says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, but all are one in Him (Galatians 3:28).