Doubled Claimants:
The Question of Tribute (Mk 12:13-17) and The Decision of Solomon on the Disputed Child (I Kings 3:16-28)

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**Introduction: The Visible and the Invisible**

In fashioning the dialogue about the Coin of Tribute (Mk 12:13-17), Mark has in mind the well-known story of Solomon deciding between two women claiming one child (I Kings 3:16-28). The two stories show radical differences, of course. To take just one: the women are not attempting to spring a trap on Solomon. But like the Pharisees and Herodians in Mark they *are* asking for an either/or judgment. Some points of contact are fairly evident, but the key that Mark has appropriated the Solomon story is not evident. To see it we must first wonder, Why does Jesus ask for the denarius “so that [he] may see it”? Joel Marcus pointedly asks “And what does Jesus ‘see’?” (*Mark* 8 – 16: 824). That is exactly the right question. And the short answer is He saw two inseparable things. Solomon asked for a sword; Jesus, for a coin, but the memory of Solomon’s sword should hang over our reading of what Jesus saw. Solomon’s judgment evidently did—and Jesus’s pronouncement will be shown to—turn on the impossibility of cutting some one thing in two. In both cases, the onlookers’ recognition of this fact accounts for their surprise. Readers of Mark’s story should do well to imitate their recognition. Recognizing Mark’s model reveals the dramatic logic of the story and in return strengthens the case that Mark imitated the story in Kings.
Similarities

The similarities include similarities of agent, place, action, and that action’s telling in language, and similarities, as well, in the speech of the agents.

a. Titled Persons: Sons of David, Kings of the Jews

Both Solomon and Jesus are “sons” of David. The First Book of Kings does not in Chapter 3 (which recounts the decision) call Solomon “son of David,” but the narrator, speaking of Solomon, names David as his father (I Kings 3:3); and Solomon and God both refer to Solomon’s father, David (I Kings 3:6,7,14). Whereas Solomon was actually the son of David’s loins, Jesus was a distant or metaphorical descendant. Just outside Jericho, Bartimaeus addressed Jesus by name and at the same time hailed him as “Son of David” (Mk 10:47). Jesus did not rebuke him. And then, as Jesus and his Twelve headed up from Jericho to Jerusalem, the crowds hailed the coming of the kingdom of David. Jesus did not rebuke them. Later, however, three paragraphs after our pericope, Jesus himself asks: How can the Messiah be Son of David if David himself calls him Lord? (Mk 12:35). “Son-of-David” talk brackets (albeit at some remove) the “Question of Tribute.”

Solomon is a king; Jesus is too or at least is called a king. Especially in as we approach the culminating episode of the gospel, the kingship of Jesus becomes a prominent issue. Pilate asks him whether he is a king, calls him a king, and then implies (perhaps ironically) that he is a king (Mk 15:2, 9, 12).
Although talk about the kingdom of God occurs elsewhere in Mark, talk about Jesus as king occurs only in Jerusalem. In the end Pilate has Jesus crucified under an inscription asserting that he is a king, “the king of the Jews” (Mk 15:27). The term used for the inscription (Mk 15:26) is the same as that used for the writing on the coin (Mk 12:16), the *epigraphê* which names Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of a god.

b. Place: Site of the Future Temple; the (second) Temple

When Solomon renders judgment and gives the child to its rightful mother, he is not in the Temple—he has not yet had it built. But building it is on his mind. He had gone to offer sacrifice at Gibeon, “the greatest of the high places” (I Kings 3:4) where he had had a dream. In the dream, God offered to grant Solomon whatever he asked for. Solomon asked for the wisdom to discern between good and evil. When he awoke he returned to Jerusalem “and stood before the ark of the covenant of Yahweh” (I Kings 3:15). Then two women arrived, each claiming to be mother of the same, one child. Solomon discerned. And the decision proved that he had received the wisdom he had asked for. On the site where he delivered his judgment he would build the Temple and its precincts.

The confrontation in Mark occurs in the same place as the confrontation in Kings—the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. Not the same temple, but the same site. This is not an improbable place for a dispute between Jesus and
factions of the establishment; but it is not necessarily a record of remembered fact. If need be Mark can have Pharisees show up in the oddest places. Mark, a few chapters earlier, had sent Jesus and the Twelve sailing across the sea to Dalmanoutha. Wherever that mysterious location may be, as soon as Jesus disembarked, Pharisees approached him and a dispute began. At Mark 10:2, for a second instance, just after Mark has put Jesus and his Twelve into the “the regions of Judah beyond the Jordan,” Pharisees approach Jesus with a question about a bit of Mosaic law. Why does this dispute about divorce occur when Jesus and the Twelve are in the Transjordan? The answer seems to be that the disputed law appears only in the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 24:1). And the words of that book were delivered, it tells us, in the regions beyond the Jordan (Dt 1:1; 34:1). As Austin Farrer noted, “In the very place where Moses gave the law of dissolution (Deut. xxxiv, 1-4) Jesus overrules him” (A Study In St Mark: 114). This second instance shows Mark suiting a doctrine to a locality. We have grounds, therefore, for suspecting that Mark located this dispute with the Pharisees and Herodians in the Temple for a reason. Here, especially, Jesus is a Solomon. Another evangelist makes the claim explicit: he is indeed “one greater than Solomon” (Matt 12:24).

c. The Two Double Claims; Two Parties to the Dispute

The language in the Book of Kings doubles up dramatically as the women make claim and counterclaim and Solomon repeats them both. One woman
claims “’My son is the live one; your son is dead’”; the other replies, “’Your son is the dead one, mine is the live one.’” The king observes the wrangling and repeats the words of contention: “’This one says…’My son is the one who is alive; your son is dead,” while the other says, “That is not true! Your son is the dead one, mine is the live one’?” The antithetical parallels starkly contrast the alternatives and show Solomon listening carefully to the exact words of the contestants. His repetition of the mirror-image claims introduces a kingly gravity to the scene.

A doubleness not strictly necessary for the plot also infects the speech of the Pharisees and Herodians. They say everything twice. First one way, then another. Their flattery is not only duplicitous, it is first of all duplicate:

“Master, we know that you are an honest man, that you are not afraid of anyone because you do not look at the face of men (ou blepeis eis prosôpon anthropón), and that you teach the way of God in all honesty.”

This retrospectively amusing persiflage credits Jesus with the virtues opposite to the vices the questioners will be shown to embody. They want to pose a disjunctive alternative in a question requiring a yes or no answer. Here, it seems, they can’t restrain themselves from asking it, pointlessly, twice: “Is it lawful to give the kensus to Caesar, or not; should we pay or not pay?” Whose law is here in view? The doubly-stated alternatives say more than is needed to set the trap, to elicit an answer choosing one of the alternatives. The
doubleness of their speech emphatically characterizes them as double-dealing, two-faced men. Hypocrites. And poor readers, it will turn out. *Hypocrites* 

One of the parties interrogating Jesus is a group not much prominent in other accounts of Jewish doings at the time—the Herodians. It is permitted, I think, to imagine them the creation of Mark, necessary for the story to work. There were, no doubt, collaborators among the Jewish residents of that occupied territory, but the story does not tell us—except in their name—whose side they might be on. They are not said to be at odds with the Pharisees over the payment of the tax, but common human experience of how disputes work suggests that one party favored one course of action and the other party the other. Likewise the story works better if the two parties are not united in the answer they wish Jesus to give but united only in their desire to get him in a trap (and this is said) such that either answer will offend one of the parties. If we are minded of Solomon’s discernment, we will infer that the two groups in Jesus’ case, like the two women in Solomon’s, are making incompatible claims.

Fair enough that the humiliated Temple philosophers try to catch Jesus the way he had caught them in the question (a *dissos logos*) about the baptism of John. Then they feared to answer because they feared the crowd. Alas for their reputations, they get caught, cannot escape. And the very cause of their inability is revealed to be, once again, their inclination to make judgments by
“looking at the faces” of those who have power, whether king or crowd. Looking at the coin, they see only the image of Caesar (the *effigies*, Caesar’s face) and do not read the inscription around the rim of the coin.

They have been caught in *prosopolêmpsia*. This sin is a particular kind of hypocrisy that results from attending overmuch to the illegitimate power of others to dictate one’s own thoughts. It is the sin that the Pharisees and Herodians, hypocritically, have just praised Jesus for not committing. They have just told him: “You do not adjust your teaching by looking into the faces of men to see how they are taking it, but you teach the way of God.” Their language recalls the choosing and anointing of David (I Kings 16. 7): “God sees, but not as man sees; for *man sees the face* but God sees the heart.” In the end, because the Pharisees and the Herodians look only at the face on the coin, where appears the image of the Roman ruler, their opposed cunningnesses are revealed as simple-minded ideological politics. (For the sin of *prosopolêmpsia*, see Romans 2.11; Ephesians 6.9; Colossians, 3.25.)

d. Dramatic Poetics: the Audible Allusion

A second pointer to the Book of Kings is the verbal echo in the command Jesus gives those challenging him: “Bring me a denarius so that I may see it.” Solomon commanded, “Get me a sword” (*labete moi makhairan*). Mark’s Jesus said, “Bring me a denarius” (*pherete moi dēnarion*). The later phrase preserves the mood (command), the meter, and (more or less) the length of
Solomon’s phrase as well as showing both internal three-syllable identity and final near-rhyme with an iota rotating around a rho.

If the stories’ logics were laid out in some formalist scheme, it would appear that the agents, objects, aids, and (up to a point) outcomes are the same. Formalist analysis, though, would note this difference between the two tales. In Solomon’s case, two women bring a baby; and Solomon asks for a sword. In Jesus’ case, he asks for a coin. If in a structuralist analysis, the coin is the baby, what does Jesus use for a sword? Perhaps we are tempted to recall that “the word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12) and identify the saying about Caesar and God as the sword. But this, I think, would be a mistake. Jesus asks to be brought the coin, and he gives a reason—so that he might see it. What is revealed results from his seeing. Jesus sees better than “those who look at the face.” He looks at the stamped likeness of the emperor and he sees and reads the letters around the likeness. His seeing is the sword. Our seeing the Markan story as allusive to the story in Kings prompts this conclusion.

e. Dramatic Logic: the Intelligible Allusion

The logical similarity of the two cases appears most clearly if we recognize what it is that Jesus and the onlookers see when Jesus is handed the coin. Jesus, like Solomon, in effect proposes that cutting the one coin in two would solve the problem. In neither case, child or coin, is it possible. If it
were possible, the disputants could render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to 
God what is God’s. For Jesus forces the contending parties to recognize that 
the actual coin has an *inscription* around the edge distinct from the *image* on the 
face of that same coin. Older denarii had the heads of gods on the front face;
“but under the Empire the denarius bore the title and effigies of the reigning 
Caesar” Around the rim of the denarius belonging to the reign which lasted 
from AD 14 to 37, run the words “TI CAESAR DIVI AUG F

AUGUSTUS. This says, “Tiberius Caesar (Son of the God, Augustus) 
Augustus.”

For the inscription, see Frederic W. Madden, *History of Jewish Coinage* (New York: Ktav, 1967; 
repr. of B. London: B. Quaritch, 1864): 247. Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and 
Andrew Burnett, editors, *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces* (Oxford: at the University 
Press, 2005).

When the particular denarius with which the poll tax had to be paid was 
brought to him, Jesus asked a twofold question. His question was not a yes or 
no question but a two-part question permitting independent answers to its two 
parts. Permitting, yes, but not explicitly requesting two answers. And the 
relentlessly doubling Pharisees and Herodians here fell into a mistaken 
unanimity and gave a one-word answer to the twofold question. He asked 
them about the coin: “of whom is this the image and the inscription?” The 
hypocrites should have stopped and looked at the inscription and thought 
before giving their answer. The correct answer was: The image is of Caesar but
the inscription (or “legend”) is “of God.” For the inscription on the coin, the coin they could see, asserts around the face of Tiberius Caesar Augustus that he is the son of the Deified Augustus, and by implication, soon to be a god himself. Instead, the Pharisees and Herodians, opposed in practice, reveal themselves united in “face-serving.” They look only at the face and not at the inscription and answer with one voice, not distinguishing image from inscription, that they are “Caesar’s.” But only the image is Caesar’s really. Though Caesar be (like all of us) made in the image of God, the assertion that his father is now divine is, for both Pharisees and Herodians and for Jesus as well, tantamount to blasphemy. Caesar is not the Son of God.

f. The Astonished Onlookers

All wondered at Solomon’s wisdom: “All Israel came to hear of the judgement the king had pronounced, and held the king in awe, recognizing that he possessed divine wisdom for dispensing justice” (I Kings 3:28). Likewise, after Jesus delivered his memorable judgment, Mark writes, “They were amazed at him.” What has caused the amazement? Surely not the saying, or at least not the saying on its own. The saying is memorable enough because of its balanced, contrasting clauses. But just as Solomon’s command that the child be given to its true mother is not grounds for astonishment but the trick by which he exposed the fraudulent heart of the greedy claimant is, so too is Jesus’ pointing out what is actually on the coin—both an image that belongs to
Caesar and the adscription of divinity that belongs only to God—this is what causes astonishment.

The silence as regards exactly what the inscription on the coin is or was—that silence is necessary for the story. Not everything in the telling of this encounter is in full view. Some searching of memory (or history) is required. That Jesus will be killed by the Roman authorities on trumped up charges and an “inscription” asserting the kingship of Jesus will surmount the instrument of his death—these matters would be known by any auditor of Mark’s account even though their recital at this stage in Mark’s telling is not yet complete. The silence of Jesus in front of Pilate Mark makes explicit. Here in the Temple, the silence of the participants, onlookers and would-be Jesus-trappers alike, is an aposiopesis (an artistic “breaking off speech and falling into silence”).

We have to recognize in Mark’s account a second dramatic silence. After the Pharisees and Herodians give their one answer, the crowd is silent, amazed. And the Pharisees and Herodians are silent too, stunned; they have nothing to say, in effect acknowledging that they have made a blasphemous claim granting to Caesar what is God’s.

The outcomes in the two legal judgments differ radically: Solomon resolved the dispute brought before him, for one mother was in the right; Jesus did not and could not resolve the question brought before him by siding with
one disputant, for both parties were in the wrong. As regards their solutions, the cases are similar in this: the means amaze. Solomon delivered no memorable saying, but he resolved the dispute in an unexpected and thoroughly astonishing way. Reading Mark’s Jesus-story as allusive to Solomon’s judgment, we should be inclined to say that it is not the onlookers’ joy at hearing the saying about Caesar and God that causes them to be amazed—it is the means by which Jesus confounded them, not what he said about the matter afterwards.

g. The Next Steps—a New Temple

When Solomon displayed to “all Israel” that he had indeed received wisdom to discern between good and evil, he set about preparing to build the Temple. Jesus, soon after silencing his opponents in the Temple will speak to his captors about having been in the Temple by day (Mk 14:49); to the Sanhedrin he will be accused of threatening to destroy the Sanctuary and boasting he would construct another “not built by hand” (Mk 14:58); and finally he will be taunted about his (unrecorded) boast to raise up a Sanctuary in three days (Mk 15:29). As with Solomon, first the demonstration of Wisdom from God, then the building of a Temple.

**Criteria for Judging Mimesis.**

Mark’s story repays careful attention and requires us to imagine, as we can, the necessary but unspoken element leading to the judicial dictum. The
language, doubled uselessly, doubled beyond necessity, sets up the double bind; the just judge expresses the tragic condition of those among us who are under pressure both to do and not to do some one thing, either commanded by God and forbidden by Caesar, or vice versa. Joel Marcus sees the saying as “a pronouncement [that] leaves room for the discernment of his hearers as to when the claims of Caesar and God conflict and when they do not” (Marcus: 826). Conceptually we can distinguish the claims of God from the claims of Caesar, but when we have to respond to them bound up in a single action, we cannot always separate them in practice. And Jesus helps the onlookers recognize the ideological hypocrisy that would reduce human political life to the slinging of slogans in an imagined world of black-and-white. That hypocrisy leads to a fickle abasement before those who appear to have power, whether that be an in-group, an out-group, or an imperial power.

That the Markan Jesus is effectively taking over Solomon’s seat of judgment requires that his saying not merely afford him escape but in addition say something of some weight. The exposure of face-serving hypocrisy coupled with the recognition of the blasphemous claim, and perhaps the humble acknowledgment of our human predicament, caught as we are by the demand to satisfy incompossible claims—these effects or some version of them suffice to generate the onlookers’ amazement.
What, finally, does the compositional practice of mimesis contribute to the story in the form we have received it? The question cannot be resolved without (a simply impossible) independent access or at least a second and third witness to what Jesus actually said in the Temple (or elsewhere) on the matter. In their absence will a set of criteria for judging mimetic composition come to our aid? We will try MacDonald’s half-dozen: “accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, and interpretability” (HEGM:8). (1) Accessibility: The Book of Kings was certainly accessible to Mark. A fairly clear case: the Raising of the Widow’s Son provides a model for the Raising of the Daughter of Jairus. (2) Analogy: I do not know of any other imitations of Solomon’s Judgement; I also do not know that there are none. (3) Density: This criterion concerns “parallels,” similarities in words, actions or things. Mark’s story shows almost no verbal similarity to the story in Kings. The two commands, “Get me a sword” and “Bring me a denarius” show a couple of words in common and a similar syntax. Are these “weighty similarities”? Hardly. (4) Order: Since order requires similar sequence of one-to-one correspondences and the pericope shows only one correspondence, the criterion is moot. Perhaps the third criterion focuses our gaze on the visible similarities of two tales—words, names, phrases, and does not capture all the features of tale-telling that can be imitated. What about plot? The third and fourth criterion in concert would not see mimesis in two dramatically similar “stories” (events in the order they
happened) rearranged at the level of “discourse” (events as they are retold, say with flashback, flashforward, anticipations, reversions) cf. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*. (5) Distinctiveness: No hapax legomenon points from Mark toward Kings. Perhaps Jesus comes to the Temple from the North as Solomon came to the Temple site from the North, a change in venue. Venue is certainly a key, a flag. Other than that there is no peculiar characterization.

And lastly, (6) Interpretability or Intelligibility: Does the hypotext make sense of the hypertext? Here I think two points are in order. First, if the unseen and mentioned (but not quoted) inscription is the hidden cause of the bystanders’ wonderment (and knowing the inscription is the source of a reader’s recognizing the trap the two parties have sprung on themselves), the impossibility of separating the coin’s inscription from Caesar’s image mimics the impossibility of solving the two women’s claims by separating the child into two. The story in Kings suggests why seeing the coin’s twofoldness is the crux for the judgment Jesus renders. Seeing the coin as the embodiment of two claims rather than as merely a piece of Caesar’s business, complicates but ultimately clarifies the meaning of Jesus’ pronouncement. Here fulfillment of the criterion depends on a condition; and the fulfillment of the condition depends on the interpretation’s measuring up to the criterion.

Second, the child certainly and unequivocally did belong to only one of the women. That might argue that if—once again, if—the judgment of Mark’s
Jesus imitates Solomon’s judgment, only one claimant to the coin is its rightful owner. And that is a conclusion that must be resisted. For paying the coin to its “owner” really is not like returning the child to its mother. Though no one involved in the controversy would doubt that the claims of God trump the claims of Caesar, the coin really does have, in effect, two mothers.

Also criterion (6). Is Mark here exalting his hero above his model? It would seem so. Mark here portrays Jesus comporting himself as “one greater than Solomon” (Matt. 12:24)? If Jesus speaks the saying as a new Solomon, the saying shows Jesus as a Lover of Wisdom, not as merely an adroit escape artist. He is here not the forerunner of the admirable Thomas More (cf. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, Act II: “If He suffers us to fall to such a case that there is no ‘scaping, then we may stand to our tackle as best we can, and yes, Will, then we may clamour like champions—if we have the spittle for it… . But it is God’s part, not our own, to bring ourselves to that extremity. Our natural business lies in escaping.”)

Do we need to recognize additional criteria? How about—(A), Does the candidate hypertext show features of literate composition? The thought is that a “literary” composition is more likely the result of, in part, the practice of imitation if it betrays features of literate prose. In Mark, figures (both of thought and of speech) lard the reported speech of Pharisees and Herodians and of Jesus himself—isocolon, polyptoton, tautology, parison, antithesis,
repetition, chiasmus, apostrophe. It is therefore a good candidate to support the claim that Mark did not merely receive and preserve oral traditional materials but worked them up, as a writer would, into an effective story. Here mimesis would have performed its usual task. Suppose Mark had received a veritable saying of Jesus (perhaps *ipsissima verba*) and a reliable tradition that put Jesus at odds with the city’s religious leaders on the matter of the poll tax. Mark thought to combine and dramatize these two elements. And he had in memory, held in memory, a story of Solomon’s judgment in the Temple. The model offered a logical structure and a dramatic “sharp-sword.” It would of course be easier for us to imagine that Mark had received an oral tradition, with all the elaborate doublings, and wrote it down. But then we would want to know whether the author of that orally-transmitted story had not him or herself modeled it on the story in Kings.

And (B), Does the newer work elsewhere show a structural, stylistic similarity to the older? Half a century ago Austin Farrer noted that Mark’s episodic style resembled the style of the stories in the Elijah-Elisha cycles in the *Books of Kings*. He assumed Mark proceeded to compose his gospel by way of imitation (see especially page 30 of *A Study in St Mark*). (This conviction did not keep Farrer from seeking first an order internal and proper to the gospel itself.) Wolfgang Roth, in the *Hebrew Gospel*, thought to crack the code of Mark and found Mark counting and recounting deeds of power as in the Elijah-
Elisha cycle. Adam Winn, in *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, assessed Roth’s achievement and built on what survived his testing. Winn’s account provides a useful review of scholarly readers who have seen the Elijah-Elisha cycle as key to understanding Markan compositional style (see especially fn 1 page 51 where Winn lists previous excursions into the question of Mark’s imitation of the *First and Second Books of Kings*). At this broader and more comprehensive level, the question about Mark’s imitative use of the two *Books of Kings* is not Whether? but, How much and in what ways? Of course this way of proceeding allows the text the possibility of being read as a whole before the reader decides that it is a patchwork of many hands.

**Conclusion**

I have found myself arguing that Mark’s story without so much as a word alludes to Solomon’s sword of judgment. I seem to have argued that in Mark’s mimesis something invisible, call it discerning judgment or wisdom, imitates Solomon’s visible sword. A paradox. On the other hand, think of Lady Justice, scales in one hand, a two-edged sword in another—image of the invisible. She wears a blindfold, lest she look at the faces of the opposed parties. Mark’s image differs in this: Jesus needs no blindfold.