

So-called "Coins of the Bible"

by Michael E. Marotta

Originally in **THE CELATOR** "Letters", Jan 1995

Many catalogs from sellers of ancient coins include selections of Judiac issues. It is important to separate fact from fiction when purchasing these coins. Jewish and Christian traditions are very strong influences on our culture. Therefore, it is too easy to be swept away by passion when considering the numismatics of ancient Israel.

Perhaps the commonest offering is the bronze prutah or lepton as a "widow's mite." This refers to passages in the books of Mark and Luke:

And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury; and many that were rich cast in much, And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples and saith unto them. Verily, I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury. For all they did cast in of their abundance but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.

(Mark 14: 41-44 KJV)

The wording in Luke 21:1-4 is somewhat more terse:

And he looked up and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said...

In 1947, Protestant churches in Great Britain considered a new translation to replace the archaic King James Standard Version. They were later joined by some Catholic scholars and the resulting work was published (with Apocrypha) in 1961 by the Oxford University Press. The words of Mark were rendered "there came a poor widow who dropped in two tiny coins, together worth a farthing." The new version in Luke says only: "he noticed a poor widow putting in two tiny coins."

Again, in Luke 12:6, the King James Version says that five sparrows are sold for "two farthings" while the newer edition prices sparrows at five for "two pence." The new International Version published by the Christian Reformed Churches tariffs sparrows at "two pennies" for five. According to them, the widow's gift was "two very small copper coins" with a footnote

that cites the original Greek text as "two lepta."

In fact, the coins in question could have come from anywhere in the Hellenic world. The tiny 10 mm bronzes of Rhodes (Sear GCV 5071-74) are even smaller than the Judaic prutah and would be more correctly called "lepton." As interesting as these considerations are numismatically, they are theologically irrelevant. The single most important fact to be derived from all of the above is NOT whether the coins were stuck by John Hycannus I. The point of the story is that the widow gave all she had.

It is an article of faith among Christians that no honest translation of the Bible can be in error because the Bible is the Word of God. In the 1600s, a "farthing" was a small silver coin, one-fourth of a silver penny. Only later were the penny and farthing reduced to copper. Farthings, leptons, or cents would mean the same thing in the same context.

We run into the same problems when considering the "shekels" of Tyre that were accepted as dues to the temple. As a unit of weight the shekel tallied six to eight grams. It is important to bear in mind that while coinage was being introduced into the world, about 600 to 550 BC, the Jews were captive in Babylon. They returned to a world which was monetized. While the Second Commandment prohibited "graven images" the fact is that coinage was too convenient to ignore and so a rabbinical decision was made to accept the coinage of Tyre. However, Tyre changed hands as the Selucids lost ground to the Ptolemies. It is also important to bear in mind that the silver of Syracuse or Athens would circulate as freely as any other coin.

When seeking one of the infamous "30 pieces of silver" that bought the life of Jesus, collectors tend to turn to the shekels of Tyre. However, Judas may have struck a better or worse bargain. He may have been paid in Ptolemaic tetradrachms. again, as with the widow's mite, the important aspects revolve around the fact that Judas sold his lord for a handful of metaphysically worthless silver. Judas finally took his own life and thereby collected his ultimate reward. Any other considerations are embarrassingly trivial.

The same is true of the "tribute penny." A denarius with the picture of Tiberius is highly prized by Christian numismatists. The assumption is that since Tiberius was the ruler of Rome at the moment of the discussion between the Pharisees and Jesus, that the denarius in question had his likeness on it. This may or may not have been the case.

Octavius struck coins in the name "Caesar Augustus" for over 40 years from 28 BC. Though Tiberius ruled from 14 AD, coins were struck with his head surrounded by the imperial legends as early as 10 AD. However, the mint in Cappadocia issued silver denarii with the imperial legends over the heads of Augustus, Drusus Junior, Tiberius, and Germanicus. "Caesar's" image and inscription could have been any of these. Consider further that Tiberius, old, and conservative, actually issued relatively little silver with his own image. In all probability, the coin mentioned in Matthew 22 carried

the head of Octavius. If so or if not, do the words of Jesus carry a different meaning?

All of the above being true, the study of Judaic coinage is still interesting. The Levant was a crossroads for trade and commerce for thousands of years before the Ionian renaissance that saw the invention of coinage. The earliest coins were known to the Phoenicians, Syrians, Israelites and Egyptians. From the bronze leptons of John Hyrcannus I to the silver shekels of the Bar Kochbar revolt 260 years later, coinage reflects the secular history of Israel. It is important only to keep the mundane in perspective while studying this interesting area of numismatics.