

## JESUS AND THE MONEY OF HIS DAY

### #3 “Render unto Caesar...”: The “Tribute Penny”

by Esther G. Juce

In our first installment, we discussed the *lepton*, the most common and smallest coin in Palestine at the time of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It was a copper piece of little value, minted by the Herods, Kings of Judea. This privilege to mint coins, among other things, was awarded to Herod I the Great by his ingratiating himself to Octavius (later known as Emperor Augustus), the victor at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE.<sup>2</sup> {It should be remembered that among the rights that the Jews had was that they could mint only copper coins, but according to the stipulations of their Faith.<sup>3</sup>}

A coin almost as common in Judea was the Roman *denarius*. Indeed, it comprised most of the silver currency in Palestine at that time.<sup>4</sup> It was a small silver piece representing a day's wages for a labourer<sup>5</sup> or a soldier<sup>6</sup>.

This denomination can be split into two categories: coins from the Roman Republic (510 BCE to Actium [see above]) transitioning to coins from the Roman Empire (Caesar Augustus [27 BCE] to the Fall of that Empire [476 CE in the West])<sup>7</sup>. The Roman society began as a republic, which is “a state in which supreme power is held by the people or their elected representatives or by an elected or nominated president, not by a monarch, etc.”<sup>8</sup> Julius Caesar (born 100 BCE) tried to become supreme ruler, but was assassinated by Brutus on March 15<sup>9</sup>, 44 BCE for this reason. Civil war ensued. After his success at Actium, Octavius made himself emperor Caesar Augustus in the year 27 BCE, thus giving birth to the Roman Empire.

This differentiation between Roman Republic and Roman Empire greatly aids in understanding the effigies on the Roman coins:

Under the Republic the earliest *denarii* had upon the obverse the heads of Hercules, Apollo, Mars, Janus, Jupiter, and afterward the head of Rome, [the guardian goddess Roma]<sup>10</sup> helmeted, and behind it X, to represent *denarius*; but under the Empire the *denarius* bore the title and effigies of the reigning Caesar.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the coins of the Republic bore the images of the Roman pantheon, various gods and goddesses, while those of the Empire depicted the emperors. While this is an important distinction, it is

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1 Frederic W. Madden. *History of Jewish Coinage and of Money in the Old and New Testament*. San Diego, CA: Pegasus Publishing Co., 1967. p. 241.

2 Florence Aiken Banks. *Coins of Bible Days*. New York: Sanford J. Durst Numismatic Publications, 1955. p. 81.

3 Esther G. Juce. “Jesus and the Money of His Day; #1. The Widow's Mite: The *Lepton*” in *Bison Tales*. New series 2018, Issue 1. p. 13.

4 Madden, p. 246.

5 *Ibid.*, p.244-6.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

7 Katherin Barber, ed. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 1251

8 *Ibid.*, p. 1225.

9 From this date comes the expression, “Beware the ides of March”.

10 Banks, p. 78.

11 Madden, p.247.

significant that during this time, there was “a growing cult of emperor worship”.<sup>12</sup> For example, the emperor Tiberius was “identified as “son of the deified Augustus”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, whether the obverse showed a Roman god or goddess, or a Roman caesar, all depicted objects of worship for the Roman citizen.

Of great significance was also the inscription on the obverse:

The title of Caesar – as well as that of Augustus – was common to all the coins of the Roman Emperors, and the name of Tiberius, [the emperor during Christ's earthly ministry] is abbreviated TI, while the name CAESAR is at length.<sup>14</sup>

Another inscription that has been found is that for Tiberius as being the “son of the deified Augustus”.<sup>15</sup> Yet another sample reads: “Tiberius, Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus – High Priest”.<sup>16</sup>

What of the reverse? During the Republic, the *denarius* could depict the pagan god Jupiter in a quadriga, or four horse chariot,<sup>17</sup> or the twin gods, Castor and Pollux.<sup>18</sup> The reverse of coins from the Empire could include something so neutral as an oak leaf,<sup>19</sup> or a seated figure, like Livia, the Empress. Livia was the Augustus' beautiful wife, whose influence caused Tiberius, her son from her previous marriage, to eventually take the throne after Augustus.<sup>20</sup> The reverse from the Roman era could even commemorate an event, such as the conquest of Judea, as represented on the pictured *denarius* from the Republic. Here, “a bearded Jew [is] kneeling beside his camel, yielding to Rome”.<sup>21</sup>

It was this spirit of humiliation of the Jewish people that contributed to the volatility of Judean politics. First, it was considered demeaning for the Jews of the time to have to use the currency of their oppressors, the Romans. Next, it was distasteful for them to use coins featuring a human effigy, since this contradicted the Second Commandment of Mosaic Law.[Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10].<sup>22</sup> Even worse was the fact that these effigies represented either pagan gods and goddesses, or human emperors that considered themselves to be divine. This is because this broke the very First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” [Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7]<sup>23</sup>

Equally vexing and controversial was the Roman Tribute Tax. According to Josephus (Flavius), the Jewish historian (37-100 CE),<sup>24</sup>

...after the Revolt,<sup>25</sup>...”Caesar...laid upon the Jews wheresoever they were, and enjoined every one of them to bring two *drachmae*<sup>26</sup> every year into the Capitol, as

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12 Banks, p. 98.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

14 Madden, p. 247.

15 Banks, p. 98.

16 Kenneth A. Jacob. *Coins and Christianity*. London: Seaby, 1985. p. 29.

17 Banks, p. 72.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83. See also Jacob, p. 29.

21 Banks, p. 72.

22 Juce. p.13.

23 Banks. p. 98.

24 Barber. p. 762

25 This must refer to the First Revolt against Rome, 66-70 CE. Banks. p. 59.

26 “...the *denarius* was almost the same as the *drachma* in weight and in value...” Banks, p. 77. “The *drachma* was one of

they used to pay the same to the temple at Jerusalem”.<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, this could have been the tax from the census: “Between 6 and 70 CE, a census tax was levied on the inhabitants of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea.”<sup>28</sup>

In any case, the Jewish people were divided as to whether or not it was lawful for a Jew to pay the tax that the Romans had imposed on them. “The Herodians were supporters of the dynasty of Herod...The Herodian fortunes were founded on unswerving loyalty to Rome.”<sup>29</sup> [See reference to Herod I above.] They were only too happy to pay the tax. The Jewish Zealots comprised another faction, being “chauvinists fanatically opposed to Roman occupation”.<sup>30</sup> The party of the Zealots advocated violence if necessary, and “refused to admit the subjection of the people of God to a foreign power”.<sup>31</sup> Somewhere in the middle were found the Pharisees. They

were chiefly a lay group that advocated a rigorous legalism, accepting as valid not only the written *Torah* [Law], but also the oral *Torah*...To be a holy nation, sacred and dedicated to Yahweh [the Lord God], was the goal of all Jews; but to achieve this by education and knowledge of the Law was a peculiarly Pharisaic aim.<sup>32</sup>

“The theoretical position of the Pharisees was identical with the position of the Zealots, but they did not believe in the use of force to achieve independence.”<sup>33</sup> Theirs was more a religious motivation: The tax had to be paid in silver coins bearing the emperor's image, raising religious scruples among the Jews.<sup>34</sup> (See discussion on obverse of the *denarius* above.) In short, the situation was like a powder keg waiting for a spark.

Into this strained milieu came Jesus of Nazareth. To add to the tension, the Pharisees were jealous of Jesus, (Matthew [Mt] 27:18), feeling threatened by his miracles and teachings. (John [Jn] 12:10,18-19). What is more, the Pharisees and Herodians, normally at different locations on the political spectrum (see above), were actually conspiring in order to try to make Jesus stumble: “Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians...”(Mt.22:15-16). Mark has the word “entrap” (Mark [Mk] 12:13), both versions showing the deliberate plan of the Pharisees against Jesus. Luke's parallel uses the word “spies” perhaps because his Gentile readers<sup>35</sup> wouldn't know the term “Herodians”. Interestingly, only Luke here articulates that the goal behind the ruse was “to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor”. (Luke [Lk]20:20) Again, Luke may be filling in the blanks for his audience since they might not have understood that delivering Jesus to Pilate the governor was the only way the Pharisees could try to destroy Him. (Incidentally, John's Gospel does not include this story of the Tribute Tax.)

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the principal silver coins of the Greeks.” Madden, p. 233. It is not certain that the Tribute Tax in Jesus' time was the same amount, nor if they had to go to Rome to pay it.

27 Banks, p. 137.

28 Edward J. Mally. “The Gospel According to Mark” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary (JBC)*, Vol. II Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. p.48.

29 John L. McKenzie. “The Gospel According to Matthew” in *JBC* Vol. II. p. 100;

30 Robert North, S.J. “Biblical Archaeology” in *JBC* Vol.II p. 700.

31 McKenzie, p 100.

32 Addison G. Wright, S.S.et al. “A History of Israel” in *JBC* Vol. II. p. 692.

33 McKenzie, p. 100.

34 Mally. p. 48.

35 Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. “The Gospel According to Luke” in *JBC* Vol.II p. 116.

All three Synoptic<sup>36</sup> Gospels continue with essentially the same material: “.We know you teach rightly the way of God and show no partiality to human beings” (See Mt. 22:16, Mk.12:14, Lk.20:21) In other words, Jesus' enemies were posing as people who took His teaching to heart. Then, to add to their treachery, they acted as if they are asking His advice: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (Mt.22:17. See also Mk.12:14-15 and Lk.20:22) This audience was fully aware that this issue was very controversial and that this question was very divisive and dangerous. (See above).

How would Jesus answer? Would He have to pick sides? Would He start a riot as the Pharisees hoped? For Jesus' reaction, all three versions use different words to say complimentary things: Luke says, “He perceived their craftiness” (20:23): He saw through their ruse. Mark writes, “knowing their hypocrisy” (12:15): Jesus showed His divine perception. Finally Matthew states, “aware of their malice” (22:18): Christ was well acquainted with His enemies' intent. In other words, Jesus saw what was in their hearts.

His answer was a practical and irrefutable object lesson, concrete and universal. Jesus asked to see the money to be used to pay the tax. All three Gospels say in the original Greek, they brought Him a *denarius*. All three say practically verbatim, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” All three accounts have that the audience reply “Caesar's”. (See Mt.22:18-21; Mk.12:15-16; and Lk.20:24). Note that the *denarius* had to be of the empire, not of the republic, since it involved Caesar. Note also the accuracy of the Gospels in describing the coin, having both an effigy and an inscription of Caesar.

Then came the *coup de grace*: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.” (Mt.22:21; Mk.12:17; Lk.20:25) This was at once a simple yet profound answer. It evaded the enemies' craftiness. It added no grist for the Zealots' mill. It maintained the order of society. It separated Church and State without some horrible admixture. Finally, it left each person to discern for oneself.

However, this passage has deep theological implications as well. Obviously, the *denarius* bears Caesar's image, and therefore belongs to him. What bears God's image? Of, course, the human being does, because all are created in God's image and likeness. (Genesis 1:26-27). Therefore this scripture is a calling to remember that we all belong to God and should respect Him and each other accordingly.

Yet another issue is addressed by Christ in these words. It will be remembered that the *denarius* depicted either a Roman god/goddess or a Caesar that fancied himself divine. In separating Caesar and God in this way, that is “Render to Caesar...and to God...”, Jesus was saying there is only one God. Christ was reinforcing and updating the ancient Hebrew Faith of His people: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” (Deuteronomy 6:13 as quoted in Mt.4:10. See also Lk.4:8.)

There is still one numismatic question to address: Whose *denarius* would have been used in this passage? Many feel that it was the coin of Tiberius, (14-37 CE), also known as the “Tribute Penny”, because he was Caesar during the time of Christ.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, other numismatists feel that because “coin hoards in Palestine suggest that the *denarii* of Augustus enjoyed a far greater circulation...a *denarius* of August of the C.L. Caesars is much more likely to be the coin of the incident.”<sup>38</sup> One cannot be certain, since the scripture does not identify which *denarius* it was.

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36 Juce. p. 15 note 36.

37 Banks, p. 99. See also Madden, p. 247.

38 Jacob, p. 29-30. C.L. Caesars refers to the reverse depicting Caius and Lucius Caesars, heirs of Augustus.

One can be sure, however, that the scriptural passage in question ends with all marveling at Jesus and being amazed in silence. (Mt.22:22; Mk.12:17; Lk.20:26). This, it would appear, is only fitting.