

JESUS AND THE MONEY OF HIS DAY

#4. *The Labourers in the Vineyard: The Denarius*

by Esther G. Juce

In the previous article of our series, we presented the *denarius* as the “Tribute Penny”. Here, Jesus silenced the crowd with the command, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. (Matthew [Mt.] 22:21; Mark [Mk.] 12:17; Luke [Lk.] 20:25). However, our review about the *denarius* is not finished. Being Rome’s principle piece of its new system of silver coinage,¹ and comprising most of the silver currency in Palestine at that time,² it bears more discussion.

The *denarius*, first coined in Rome in 212 BCE, (BC),³ became the principal silver coin in the Roman system during that period.⁴ It was at first equal to 10 Roman *asses*, and was thus marked with the Roman numeral “X” or ten to denote this value.⁵ (The Roman *as* was a crude bronze piece⁶ which will be discussed in our next installment.) Eventually, the *as* was devalued to be 16 to the *denarius*.⁷ To put it in other ways, the *denarius* first was minted as 84 to the pound weight, but then under Nero⁸ was reduced to 96 to the pound. Similarly speaking, it was first fixed at 70 grains,⁹ then in 182 BCE(BC) reduced to 60 grains, then again under Nero to 52 grains.¹⁰

As mentioned in the previous installment, the *denarius* represented a day’s wage for a labourer or a soldier.¹¹ Was this a fair wage? Some authorities say “yes”,¹² and some authorities say “no”.¹³ In the Gospel according to Luke, two *denarii* were given by the compassionate and generous “Good Samaritan” to the innkeeper to to “take care” of the victim of the robbers. The amount must have been significant and sufficient in order for the innkeeper to agree to this arrangement and wait for further reimbursement from the Good Samaritan upon his return. (Lk.10: 29-37, especially v. 35). The Gospel of Matthew is thought to have been written shortly after 70 CE(AD),¹⁴ and that of Luke around 80 CE(AD)¹⁵ independently of each other.¹⁶ Thus, the value of the *denarius* would probably have been similar in both texts, remembering that Nero would have already devalued the *denarius*, affecting both cases equally. (See above.) Perhaps this requires more research, which would be beyond the scope of

1 This new system came to be in 180 BCE (BC). Florence Aiken Banks. *Coins of Bible Days*. New York: Sanford J. Durst Numismatic Publications, 1955. p. 77.

2 Frederic W. Madden. *History of Jewish Coinage and of Money in the Old and New Testament*. San Diego, CA: Pegasus Publishing Co., 1967, p. 246.

3 Kenneth A. Jacob. *Coins and Christianity*. London: Seaby, 1985. p. 6.

4 Madden, p. 245.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

6 Banks, p. 76.

7 Madden, p. 245.

8 Nero was the Roman emperor from 54 to 68 CE (AD), and was infamous for his cruelty. Katherin Barber, ed. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 975.

9 Jacob, p. 6

10 Madden, p. 246.

11 Esther G. Juce. “Jesus and the Money of His Day; #3 ‘Render unto Caesar...’: The Tribute Penny” in *Bison Tales*. New Series 2018, Issue 3. p. 16.

12 Jacob, p. 34,

13 John L. McKenzie. “The Gospel According to Matthew” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary (JBC)*, Vol.II. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. p. 97.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

15 Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. “The Gospel According to Luke” in *JBC* Vol.II p.118.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

this paper. In any case, apparently after Nero's devaluation, the *denarius* was now the value of sixteen *asses*, but the soldiers were still being paid only the equivalent of ten *asses*. Obviously, in this case at least, something was not fair and someone was lining their pockets!

What did the *denarius* look like? Interestingly, most early Roman pieces were crude and ugly. It was only later that the coins displayed more artistry and better workmanship.¹⁷

During the mid first century BCE (BC), it was becoming popular for the *denarii* of the Roman Republic¹⁸ to commemorate occasions, such as conquests or annexations.¹⁹ Several *denarii* of this type were coined, including victory over the Maccabean Dynasty²⁰ and over those who aided them. The reverses of such coins depict the conquered rulers submissively kneeling and offering palms to the conquering Romans and may even include inscriptions such as “Judaeus”²¹, identifying the conquest.

Another aspect of the subject matter of these coins “makes it apparent that a new trend toward human hero-worship by numismatic means was now emerging”.²² For example, one piece of this period shows Pompey the Great²³ on the obverse, “one of the first of Roman coinage to present the portrait of a mortal”.²⁴ (It will be remembered that the coins of the Roman Republic, that is before 27 BCE, bore the image of gods and goddesses almost exclusively.)²⁵ The reverse depicts the legendary Catanian brothers who rescued their parents during the eruption of Mount Etna in 476 BCE(BC). Then from the time of Caesar Augustus, (27 BCE) “the portrait of the emperor formed the normal type on the obverse...and many dies were exceptionally finely engraved...and are outstandingly attractive.”²⁶

One passage in the Bible that has familiarized many with the term *denarius* is the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16). Indeed, the “moral of the story” uses the *denarius* as an essential prop.:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a housemaster who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for a *denarius* a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a *denarius*. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of

17 Banks, p. 78.

18 For contrasts of the coins of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, see Juce, pp.16-17.

19 Banks, p. 79.

20 See 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 note 13.

21 Banks, p. 79.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

23 Juce, “The Widow's Mite.” p. 13.

24 Banks, p. 79.

25 Juce, “Render Unto Caesar...” p. 16.

26 Jacob, pp.7-8.

them also received a *denarius*. And on receiving it they grumbled at the housemaster, saying, 'The last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a *denarius*? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first and the first last."

This parable is found only in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Perhaps this is because Matthew had been a tax collector when Jesus called him, (see Mt. 9:9) and thus knew the value of money and wages.

At this point, one needs a brief note about parables. In Greek, the word "parable" literally means "throw alongside", and is very close to the word "parallel". In other words, it is like an allegory. Jesus uses parables to help the listener better understand and remember a principal or idea, "...For this people heart has grown dull...(Mt.13: 10-17, especially v.15) For the Evangelist Matthew, the fact that Jesus speaks in parables is even a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (Mt.13:14-15 quoting Isaiah 6:9-10) and of Asaph (Mt.13:34-35 quoting Psalm 78:2). The parable differs from the other parts of the Gospel that we have discussed up to this point: The Widow's Mite, The Thirty Pieces of Silver, and The Tribute Penny all deal with actual historic events. In contrast, the parable is a teaching device.

Our parable begins with the phrase "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." (Mt.20:1) This expression, "kingdom of heaven" is unique to Matthew, other evangelists using the wording, "kingdom of God". It is used over 30 times in Matthew's Gospel, 11 of which introduce parables. For Matthew, it is time to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand", or in other words, the kingdom is here and now. (See Mt.3:2; 4:17; 10:7). It is hard to enter the kingdom of heaven, (Mt.5:20; 7:21-23; 8:11-13) yet if one is humble like a child, one can enter (Mt.18:1-4; 19:14). Finally, entrance into the kingdom is not automatic nor guaranteed by membership in a particular community: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt. 8:11-12).

The basic story of this parable (Mt.20:1-16) is that the housemaster goes out to hire labourers for his vineyard. He goes out early (around 6:00 a.m.) and makes an agreement with the workers that they will be paid a *denarius*, a standard day's wage (see above). The housemaster then hires again at 9:00 a.m., noon, and 3:00 p.m., making agreements as he goes along. Finally, he goes once more at the "eleventh hour" (v.6) (approximately 5:00 p.m.) and hires labourers then, too. When it comes time to pay the workers (about 6:00 p.m.), the last are paid first with a *denarius* each. When the time comes to pay the earlier labourers, they think they will get paid more. However, they end up receiving also only a *denarius* each. These earlier workers then complain against the housemaster that he has made the latecomers equal to the earlybirds "who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."(v.12) The housemaster then reminds the earlier workers of their original agreement of a *denarius* for their work, saying, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong...I choose to give to this last as I give to you...Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?..."(v.13a,14b,15a).

This parable communicates a story that appears to be inordinately unfair. Why should those who have slaved for twelve hours under the burning sun be treated the same as those who have worked only one hour near the cool of the day? To begin, there is nothing criminal here: The housemaster has kept his

original agreements with all concerned. (v.13b) Furthermore, the money belongs to the housemaster, and he has every right to distribute this wealth as he desires. Finally, this is no casual agreement between the housemaster and the the early labourers. The Greek word for “agreeing” that is used in this passage is *symphoneo*, (here inflected as *symphonisas*, v.2), which implies a type of intimate joint decision, (also used in I Corinthians 7:5 for husbands and wives!).²⁷ Its alternate definition is “to be sufficiently like something as to fit or match”,²⁸ again with intimate sensibilities. The term may even remind one of the English word, “symphony”, which implies constant and beautiful relationships of effort and cooperation. It is important to note that the housemaster uses the same word again at the end of the parable, (here inflected *symephonisas* v.13) reinforcing and emphasizing the richness of the relationship.

At this point, it might be coming clear that this story is not simply about being properly reimbursed for one's labour: It is about one's relationship with God. This idea can be demonstrated by looking at verse four: “And to them, he (the housemaster) said, 'you go into the vineyard, too, and whatever is right (just) I will give you’”. Again the word in Greek tells much: “right” or “just” (*dikaïos*) means “pertaining to being in accordance with what God requires”.²⁹ Another meaning is “pertaining to being in a right relationship with someone”.³⁰ In other words, the housemaster is not only saying, “I will pay you justly”, but also, “I will put right your relationship with God”.

This truly sounds like a parable about the kingdom of heaven, all right. Here's one possible allegorical schema: The housemaster is God the Father or Christ. The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven or the world. The labourers are we humans. God can invite us to work in His kingdom at any point in our lives or our respective journeys, whether we come early or at the “eleventh hour”. The agreement is our relationship to God. The *denarius* is our goal, our reward, and the fulfillment of our journey. The evening is the return of Christ or our repose. Payment of the *denarius* is the fulfillment in the kingdom of heaven. All who worked in the kingdom will receive its fullness, whether they entered early or at the eleventh hour: All will be treated equally and will receive the full gifts of God.

Sounds simple and easy, right? Not so fast! There is an element of judgment here. It will be remembered that the early workers are murmuring literally against (*kata*) the housemaster. *Kata* with the genitive³¹ can be “a marker of opposition with the possible implication of antagonism.”³² They are doing this because they do not want to be made equal to the latecomers (v.12).

This competitiveness and resentment earns the first labourers a dramatic dismissal: In verse 14a, the housemaster says, “Take what belongs to you, and go;...” Here the word for “go” in Greek is the imperative singular *upage*, which is more forceful than other terms for “go”³³. Another definition for *upage* is “to depart from someone's presence, with the implication of a changed relation: 'to depart, to leave, to go away’³⁴. Indeed, exactly this same word, in the imperative singular, is used by Jesus in the wilderness to drive away Satan. (Mt.4:10): *upage, Satana*. Another example is shared by Matthew

27 Johannes P. Louw et al, eds. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains. Vol.I. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988. P. 368.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 618.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 744.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 452.

31 The grammatical case of nouns, pronouns, and adjectives corresponding to “of”, or other prepositions or indicating possession. See Barber, p.583.

32 Louw, p. 802.

33 *Ibid.*, p.187.

34 *Ibid.*, p.189.

(16:23) and Mark (8:33) after Christ's passion prediction following Peter's confession about Jesus: *upage opiso mou, Satana* (Get behind me, Satan). One can appreciate the force and depth of the dismissal that Matthew (and the housemaster) want to convey in verse 14a!

The last part of the housemaster's speech is "Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (v.15b) He is indeed generous to all: Since the *denarius* is valued to be equal to ten to sixteen Roman *asses*, (see above) the housemaster easily could have paid the workers an hourly wage, reimbursing the later workers for only a fraction of the day.

However, it is not so simple. The original Greek here reads very differently: "Or is your (singular) eye evil because I am good?" (v.15b) This sounds kind of bizarre, but makes sense with a little delving elsewhere in Matthew. In chapter 6 verses 22-23, Jesus says,

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"

In other words, if one's way of looking at things, or one's perspective, is good and positive, so will one's body, or being, be. But if one's perspective is evil and negative, how great will be that evil. Finally, earlier in Matthew, Jesus says, "One is the good One." (Mt.19:17b) The parallels in Mark (10:18b) and Luke (18:19b) are more direct: "No one is good unless is One: God." Thus in the parable, v.15b identifies the housemaster as being good and as being God.

So how can we apply this parable to life? First, one should do one's own work and not compare oneself to others. Secondly, one should welcome all people equally, whether they come first or last, because the fulness of the kingdom of heaven is offered to all. Finally, one should keep striving to the bitter end, since the early worker murmured against the housemaster and received a dismissal as a result.

It is most interesting how the parable of the workers in the vineyard is much better understood with Matthew's use of the technical term, *denarius*. That's what happens when numismatics is allowed to enrich biblical studies and vice versa, I might add!