

JESUS AND THE MONEY OF HIS DAY

#2. The Betrayal: Thirty Pieces of Silver

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Lengthening days and warmer temperatures herald the feast of Easter, also called by the Greek word for Passover, Pascha. In the Christian experience, Pascha is the Feast of feasts, Holy Day of holy days, and brings forty days of celebration and much joy to the spring season.

Not so joyous are the solemn days of Holy Week leading up to the Paschal feast. On Holy Wednesday, we remember the betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth by Judas, son of Simon Iscariot:

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver Him to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver (or silver coins or literally thirty "silvers"). And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray Him. (Matthew (Mt) 26:14-16)

The numismatic question here is what were these pieces of silver? To confirm the text, only Matthew's Gospel specifies that thirty silver pieces (*argyria*, plural, literally silver coins or "silvers") were paid out.¹ Mark (Mk) and Luke (Lk) both use simply the word *argyrion* (singular, literally silver or silver money)²:

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. And when they heard it they were glad, and promised to give him silver/silver money. And he sought an opportunity to betray Him. (Mk.14:10-11)

Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them. And they were glad, and engaged to give him silver/silver money. So he agreed, and sought an opportunity to betray Him to them in the absence of the multitude. (Lk.22: 3-6)

The Gospel of John (Jn) mentions nothing about payment for the betrayal.

What were these thirty silver coins referred to in Matthew? Many debates have been made among numismatists about the identity of these pieces of silver.³ A number of theories have been proposed. It has been considered, for example, that the coins in question were Roman *denarii*⁴, which were indeed silver,⁵ and were abundant in Palestine during that time.⁶ The *denarius* was a day's pay for a labourer⁷ or a soldier.⁸ However, this was a small coin, and it has been theorized that it was the "large money",

1 Johannes P. Louw et al, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains. Volume I.* New York: United Bible Societies, 1988. p. 62

2 *Ibid.* p. 62

3 Kenneth A. Jacob. *Coins and Christianity.* London: Seaby, 1985. p. 30. Also see Florence Aiken Banks. *Coins of Bible Days.* New York: Sanford J. Durst Numismatic Publications, 1955. p. 100.

4 *Ibid.* p. 32. See also Frederic W. Madden. *History of Jewish Coinage and of Money in the Old and New Testament.* San Diego, CA: Pegasus Publishing Co., 1967. p.240.

5 Madden, p.245.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

usually Greek *tetradrachms*, that were used for such nefarious deeds.⁹

Another theory that has been advanced is based on the abundance of the coins in Palestine during that period. Evidently, “Hebrew silver *shekels* did not circulate at this time in Judea”¹⁰ However, it is thought that two silver large coins did. These were the *tetradrachm*, minted at the city of Tyre in Phoenicia (now Lebanon) and the *stater*, minted at the city of Antioch during the time of Caesar Augustus (27 B.C.E. - 14 C.E.). These two Greek imperial¹¹ coins “are thought to have been at least part of the ‘thirty pieces of silver’”¹². The *tetradrachm* was current in Palestine, and was the same weight as the *shekel*.¹³ Interestingly, the *stater* means standard, and was applied to the *tetradrachm* of Athens.¹⁴ Indeed, Madden appears to use the terms *stater* and *tetradrachm* synonymously, with the *stater* being indicative of the standard weight or measure.¹⁵ For comparison's sake, the Roman *denarius* was one quarter the value of the *tetradrachm* or *stater*.¹⁶

There are also two very strange positions that have been maintained throughout many years. There are the so-called “Judas Pennies”, *tetradrachms* struck in the island of Rhodes three or four centuries before Christ. They feature on the obverse a facing head of the sun-god Helios surrounded by rays of light, mistakenly thought to be the head of Christ wearing the crown of thorns. These misrepresented coins would hardly have been in circulation during the time of Jesus, so it would be unlikely that they would have constituted part of the thirty pieces of silver. Also, being minted so long before Christ, they could hardly have born His image.¹⁷

An even more sinister ruse has involved the Jewish *shekels* of the First Revolt against Rome. Advertised as being the first Jewish coins of 138 B.C.E., they have been identified with the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas. Since the sixteenth century, multiple copies have been made and sold, having only a superficial resemblance to the original *shekels*. Not only do these faux coins come with false information, but the genuine prototypes have been unequivocally dated as coming from the First Revolt of the Jews Against the Romans (66-70 C.E.), some 35 years after the betrayal by Judas.¹⁸

One final, more modern approach is as follows: The temple levied an annual tribute of one half *shekel* for each of the children of Israel in the census (Exodus 30:13-15),¹⁹ a tribute that had to be paid in *shekels* as much as possible,²⁰ Thus there could have been a substantial hoard of these coins in the temple. In particular, the *shekel* minted in Tyre would be especially numerous in the collection,²¹ This was because the weight in silver of the Tyrian *shekel* fulfilled the weight requirements according to Moses' Law for the temple tribute, whereas Antioch's silver piece did not contain enough silver.²²

9 Banks, p. 100. She theorizes that the “large money” was used by the chief priests to bribe the Roman soldiers “to misrepresent the facts of the Resurrection”. See also Jacob, p. 32.

10 Reprinted from London Numismatic Society Newsletter (LNSN). “Coins of the Time of Jesus” in *The Canadian Numismatic Journal.*, Volume 14, Number 3, March 1969, p. 106.

11 Madden, pp. 232, 239.

12 LNSN, p.106. See also Madden p. 241.

13 Madden, p.239.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 239. See also Jacob, pp.5-6.

16 *Ibid.*, pp.239-240.

17 Jacob, pp.30-31.

18 *Ibid.*, pp.31-32.

19 Madden, p. 236.

20 Jacob, p. 30.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

22 Banks, p. 95.

In any case, the thirty pieces of silver were either *shekels* or their equivalent, such as silver *tetradrachms*, The approximate value would have been “fair wages for 120 days of labour”.²³ Unfortunately, the text in Matthew discloses only the term “silvers”, “silver pieces”, or “silver coins”. Above and beyond that, the numismatist must be satisfied with a mystery, until future research proves otherwise.

One fact that may mystify many is how the chief priests came up with thirty pieces of silver as the price of value for the Christ. According to the Old Testament, thirty *shekels* of silver is the replacement cost of a slave: “If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.” (Exodus 21:32) In other words, thirty pieces of silver is the value of a slave. This juxtaposition of “slave” and “Jesus, King of the Jews” (Mt.2::2, Mt.27:37 & parallels²⁴) seems most incongruous. We certainly treated Jesus abhorrently as part of His Passion, submitting Him to spitting, mocking, betrayal, denial, scourging and finally crucifixion (Mt.26:47 – 27:50 & parallels), handling Him worse than a slave. However, scripture itself substantiates this association:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant (*doulos*), being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2: 5-8)

The Greek word *doulos* can mean either servant or slave.²⁵ Thus the justification for using the term “slave” for Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe to be the Son of God Incarnate, is based on His extreme humility.

There is another reference to thirty pieces of silver in the Old Testament: The Prophet Zechariah²⁶ is portrayed as a good shepherd rejected by his sheep and says:

And I took my staff Grace, and I broke it, annulling the covenant which I had made with all the peoples. So it was annulled on that day, and the traffickers in the sheep, who were watching me, knew that it was the Word of the Lord. Then I said to them, “If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them.” And they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. Then the Lord said to me, “Cast it into the treasury” -- the lordly price at which I was paid off by them. So I took the thirty shekels of silver and cast them into the treasury in the house of the Lord. Then I broke my second staff Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel. (Zechariah 11: 10-14)

Admittedly, this citation “is one of the most obscure passages in the Old Testament”.²⁷ Apparently, however, this good shepherd did not labour for a wage, and he said to the authorities, “You can pay me

23 Jacob, p.33.

24 “Parallels” simply refers to similar material found in the other Gospels, i.e. Mark, Luke, and John.

25 J. Gresham. *New Testament Greek for Beginners*. Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1923. p.258.

26 The prophet priest Zechariah ministered to Israel from 520 to 518 B.C.E. after the Hebrew people's exile in Babylon from 587 to 539 B.C.E. See Carroll Stuhlmueller. “Haggai Zechariah Malachi” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (*JBC*), Vol I. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. p.389.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 395.

or not.”²⁸ Inspired by the Lord, Zechariah then rejected the paltry sum, associating it with slavery and the people's corruption. It is difficult to see the connection of this quotation with Christ's Passion. However, one need only recall that Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd (Jn 10: 14), who lays down His life for the sheep (Jn 10:15). Moreover, Christ's own people rejected Him (Mt. 27:1) and were corrupt (Mt.23:3). In this way, perhaps it is portentous in that both Zechariah and Matthew, in their respective passages, see betrayal and rejection of the good shepherd and the Good Shepherd by the corrupt people.

At this juncture, one may wonder why a betrayal process was necessary in order to capture Christ. We too easily forget with our modern multimedia that the chief priests who wanted to destroy Jesus did not have photographs or videos of Him to circulate in order to identify Him. “And the chief priests and scribes...sought a way to destroy Him; for they feared Him because all the multitude was astonished at His teaching.” (Mk.11:18). “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people...took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill Him. But they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult among the people'.” (Mt.26: 3-5) Thus they needed someone who knew definitively what Jesus looked like, and knew Him well enough to know what private places He frequented, so that they could arrest Jesus “in the absence of the multitude” (Lk.22:6). Enter Judas Iscariot.

A final mystery that should be addressed is the question of why Judas betrayed Jesus in the first place. Evidently, Judas Iscariot was identified as a thief who took money from the disciples' money box.(Jn.12: 4-6). Indeed, in Matthew, Judas asked the chief priests for money up front as a payment to betray Christ. (Mt. 26:14-15) However, avarice alone seems to have been insufficient cause to do such a drastic act as to betray Jesus.

There must have been a greater motivation for Judas than financial gain. It is interesting how often even the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth were searching for an earthly king. After the crucifixion and before the discovery of the resurrection, Luke records,”We were hoping that it was He (Jesus) who would redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21).

The people expected, incorrectly, that Christ would be their saviour and redeemer from the temporal afflictions that beset them, and from the yoke of slavery to the Romans. And they hoped that He would rule as King over an earthly Kingdom.²⁹

Judas may have maintained an even more radical version of this popular misconception of Christ. He may well have been one of the Jewish Zealots, who “were chauvinists fanatically opposed to Roman occupation”.³⁰ Even his name bears witness to this possibility:

His name and patronymic (Simon) are both those of members of the Maccabee family, leaders of Jewish nationalism two centuries earlier. Judas is also the name of several nationalistic rebels in the first century. It is therefore not impossible that Judas was a name chosen in nationalistic families...³¹

If Judas was a Zealot, is it possible that he wanted Jesus to respond violently to the mob that accompanied Judas, (Mt.26: 47) and thus to trigger an insurrection against the Romans? Was he trying

28 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

29 Theophylact. *The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke*. House Springs, Missouri: Chrysostom Press, 1997. p. 320.

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

31 *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. Nashville, Tenn.:Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1969.p.949.

to force Jesus' hand? Indeed, one of the disciples *did* react violently, cutting off an ear of the slave³² of the high priest. (Mt. 26: 51) Jesus told the disciple to “put his sword back into its place” (Mt.26:52). Then He explicitly stated that He was willingly allowing the scriptures to be fulfilled, namely that Jesus would meekly and nonviolently permit all of this to happen to Him: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7).³³ It was at that point that “all the disciples forsook Him and fled”. (Mt.26:56) They understood violence, but did not understand Christ's meekness in willingly sacrificing Himself. (Mt.26:53)

Judas had also not understood, but realized that Jesus had been seized because of him, and that Christ was innocent on all counts. (Mt.26:3-4). Unfortunately, he also did not understand that on the third day after the crucifixion, that Jesus would rise from the dead. So he despaired “and went and hanged himself”. (Mt.27:5) If only he had waited three days, he would have seen that his despicable betrayal had given way to the death of Death and the possibility of inheriting eternal life in God's Kingdom, which begins in the here and now.

As far as the fate of the thirty pieces of silver goes, scripture says that Judas “threw down the pieces of silver in the temple,” (Mt. 27:5), recalling the prophecy of Zechariah mentioned above.

But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.” So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. (Mt.27: 6-7)

Thus ends the story of the thirty pieces of silver. Scripture does not identify these coins. Neither does the Bible spell out the reasons why Judas betrayed Jesus. These mysteries are compelling, and only go to show how interesting combining numismatics and biblical studies can be.

32 According to John 18:10, the slave's name was Malchus.

33 It is theorized that this section of the book of the prophecy of Isaiah was written during the Babylonian Exile. See Carroll Stuhlmueller. “Deutero-Isaiah” in *JBC* Vol. I. p.366.