

JESUS AND THE MONEY OF HIS DAY

#5 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”: The *Assarion* by Esther G. Juce

In our previous installment, we alluded to the Roman *as*. However, in order to properly study the *as* and our biblical passage, we need to begin with the *assarion*, its Greek counterpart. This piece was “a Greek copper or bronze coin of varying weight and value”.¹ It was also considered to be a small coin of low value.² It was not as small a denomination as the *lepton*,³ which we encountered in the very first article of this series. The *lepton*, it will be remembered, was the smallest copper coin that circulated in Palestine at the time of Jesus,⁴ and probably thus the coin of least value. It took eight *lepta* to make one *assarion*.⁵ In any case, “in practically all circumstances, references to *assarion*...may be made in terms of 'a very small coin' or 'a coin with very little value' or 'money that was not worth very much’”.⁶

The word *assarion* has been found inscribed upon the Greek autonomous⁷ copper coins of Chios, an island in the Aegean Sea reputed to be the birthplace of Homer.⁸ The depicted *assarion* dates back to about 84-44 BCE(BC). “On the obverse is the badge of Chios, a winged sphinx; on the reverse is an amphora,⁹ flanked by “Chios” (left) and a magistrate's name (right).”¹⁰ The inscriptions included “*assarion*”, “*assaria duo*” (or two *assaria*), “*assaria tria*” (or three *assaria*), and “*imuassarion*” (or half an *assarion*). The latter “was the sum given by travellers in Italy for a day's living”, and four *assaria* would have been the equivalent to the daily pay of a foot-soldier.¹¹ It should be noted that there may have been two systems of coinage: a greater and a lesser. “The greater gives an average *assarion* of 85.45 grains, and the lesser, one of 36.16. The later coins are probably of the time of Augustus,”¹² and may have been minted at Antioch.¹³

While little is known about the *assarion*, its Roman counterpart, the *as*, boasts a wider literature. When compared, the Greek *assarion* was either equal to one half of the Roman *as*,¹⁴ or was its exact

1 R.C. Willey. “Coins of Palestine in New Testament Times” in *The Canadian Numismatic Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 12, December, 1963. p. 507

2 Florence Aiken Banks. *Coins of Bible Days*. New York: Sanford J. Durst Numismatic Publications, 1955. p. 155.

3 Kenneth A. Jacob. *Coins and Christianity*. London: Seaby, 1985. p. 36.

4 Frederic W. Madden. *History of Jewish Coinage and of Money in the Old and New Testament*. San Diego, CA: Pegasus Publishing Co., 1864 (1967 reprint). p. 241.

5 Madden, p. 302.

6 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. 63.

7 “These autonomous issues of the Roman period are known to numismatists as the 'Greek Imperial' series, retain something of their Greek character and the inscriptions on the coins are frequently in Greek.” Jacob, p.8. See also Madden, p. 302.

8 Banks, p. 157.

9 An amphora is “a Greek or Roman vessel with two handles and a narrow neck”. Katherin Barber, ed. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 42.

10 Banks, p. 85.

11 Madden, p. 243. There appears to be a little bit of confusion in Madden's words at this point. He says here that the “foot soldier” was paid two *oboli* (the equivalent of 4 *assaria*), but the “soldier” was paid ten *asses* (the equivalent of 20 *assaria*). He attempts to reconcile the difference by saying there were two or more systems of coinage, a greater and a lesser. More research is needed here.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

13 Banks, p. 92.

14 Madden, p. 302.

equivalent.¹⁵ The precursor to the *as* made its first appearance as the *aes rude*, possibly as early as the fifth century BCE. Here, this currency was “in the form of lumps of bronze completely unworked”.¹⁶ By 348 BCE the *aes signatum*¹⁷ appeared as a coarse, oblong bar metal bearing a crudely stamped figure of a cow, a sheep, or some other domestic animal.¹⁸ These pieces “were money and not coin as they were not adjusted to a correct weight and had to be weighed at every transaction”.¹⁹

By 298 BCE, while weighing the same, the coin, the *aes grave*²⁰ was now a solid circle two and a half inches in diameter. On the obverse was its guardian divinity, the two-faced god Janus, the keeper of the gate of heaven. With his unique ability to see in both directions at the same time, he watched over all entrances to new places, time, and events (hence the first month of the year, January!). These coins “bore on their reverse the prow of a ship - representing, probably, Rome's recognition of the importance of maritime supremacy in its conquest of the lands around the Mediterranean”.²¹ It had the simple legend ROMA.²²

The term *as* originally referred to weight, not coinage, being the Roman pound, which was just under 12 modern imperial ounces. Clearly, it was unwieldy to carry these pieces in any quantity,²³ and Roman traders found that these heavy bronze pieces were too bulky. Thus between 280 and 265 BCE the Roman mint began striking smaller silver coins. Soon after, the huge bronze *as* suffered its first reduction in size and in value. By 241 BCE, the *as* was only two ounces, and by 89 BCE, it had shriveled to a mere half ounce.²⁴ The *as* in this form was discontinued in 82 BCE.²⁵

The *as* in its heyday was “the original base metal unit of the (Roman) Republic”.²⁶ This “coin (*aes/as*) in diminishing sizes remained the standard denomination for 500 years”.²⁷ Indeed, the ever-familiar *denarius* was actually originally considered to be “the silver piece-of-ten-*asses*”.²⁸ There were silver subdivisions: “the piece-of-five-*asses* (*quinarius*) and the piece-of-two-and-a-half-*asses* (*sestertius*). In bronze, there was a two-pounder or double-*as* (*dupondius*).”²⁹ Also in bronze, there were a number of smaller units:

the 2-inch *semis* [half-*as*], portraying Jupiter (the Roman Zeus); the 1 3/4-inch *triens* [third-*as*], picturing Minerva (the Roman Athena); the 1 5/8-inch *quadrans* [quarter-*as*], showing Hercules (the Roman Herakles); the 1 1/4-inch *sextans* [sixth-*as*],

15 Many more sources treat the two coins as having the identical value, using the terms *assarion* and *as* interchangeably: Banks, p.92; Willey, p.506; John Fox. *Roman Coins and How to Collect Them*. London & New York: Longman, 1983. p. 125; Fr. Peter E. Gillquist, Project Director. *The Orthodox Study Bible*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, p. 848. More research is needed here.

16 Jacob, p. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

18 Banks, p. 76

19 Jacob, p. 6.

20 The exact year is up for debate. Jacob, p. 6.

21 Banks, p.76-77.

22 Fox, p. 27.

23 Banks, p. 76.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

25 Fox, p. 169.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

featuring Mercury (the Roman Hermes); and the 1-inch *uncia* [twelfth-*as*], honouring sometimes Bellona, goddess of war, and sometimes Roma, goddess of Rome.³⁰

After the *as* was discontinued by the Republic in 82 BCE, the “name was handed on to the low copper denomination of the Empire,” although the fractions were not included.³¹ The obverse of the depicted *as*, struck in 10-11 CE (AD), shows Tiberius as a young prince under Augustus. The “SC” on the reverse, a common feature on Roman coins, stands for *Senatus consulto*, or with consent of the Senate.³² Emperors Nero and Trajan experimented with asses of orichalcum, zinc added to copper, often called “mountain copper”.³³ Pure copper had given way to copper-bronze by the end of the first century CE. The *as* with its multiples then disappeared.³⁴

Whatever happened to the *as*, the *assarion* was still in the mind of Matthew, as is shown in 10:29-31:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny (*assarion*, here inflected as *assariou*)? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

These verses come in the midst of an exhortation to fearless confession. One is called to proclaim upon the housetops what is whispered (v.27). One should not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, one should fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (v.28). The passage finishes by saying that if one acknowledges or denies Christ before human beings, Jesus will do likewise before His Father in heaven (vs.32-33). In other words, a person should not fear even under extremely trying circumstances.

This sentiment is in keeping with another verse, Matthew 6:26: “Look at the birds of the air: They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” In this case, the context is in the more familiar discussion of not to have anxiety over what one will eat or wear.(vs.25-33) Many will recall the beautiful verse: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil or spin...” (v.28b) However, our passage is of course much more challenging and urgent.

What does “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny” mean? (v.29a) Evidently, the sparrow “was one of the cheapest articles sold on the market”,³⁵ and was the main ingredient for a protein soup.³⁶ It is not completely obvious whether the marketplace referred to here is that of general food markets or the market in the temple. If it is the latter, it would be in keeping with the Levitical law, which prescribes for the atonement or purification of a woman who has given birth an offering of “two turtledoves or two young pigeons” “if she cannot afford a lamb”. (Leviticus 12:8). In other words, the two birds were much more affordable than a lamb. Incidentally, that is how we know that Jesus came from a poor

30 Banks, pp. 76-77 and Fox. pp.27, 170.

31 Fox, pp. 169-170.

32 Banks, p. 119.

33 Fox, p. 170, 26.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

35 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. 81

36 Fox, p. 125.

family, since for the purification, they offered “a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons’”.(Luke 2:22-24)

One may ask, why does Matthew refer to the coin *assarion* for the value of two sparrows? First, one can suppose that this was the actual market value at the time. Secondly, however, this term illustrates very concretely that the sparrows were of *some* value, but not of little value as with the *lepton*, (see above), or simply free for the taking.

The following sentence is crucial: “And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.” (v. 29b) At first glance, one may get the impression that it is “God's will” when a sparrow falls. Actually, the original Greek reads like this: “And one out of them will not fall onto the earth without your Father.” First of all, the expression “one out of them” seems to refer to the entire cohort of sparrows, sounding more like “not even one out of the sparrows will fall...” or “not a single one of them will fall...”³⁷ This understanding would certainly imply that the Father is caring for *all* of the sparrows. Secondly, the phrase “will not fall onto the earth” seems to say that the sparrows are constantly being buoyed up by the Father, while the “falling onto the earth” is an exception. Finally, the phrase “without (*aneu*) your Father” is elliptical or cryptic, because it presumes some kind of involvement by God. Some have interpreted the phrase to mean “without your Father's consent”, while others say it signifies “without your Father's knowledge”. “The particular manner...of involvement by God must depend upon the broader context and not upon the meaning of *aneu* (without).”³⁸ Indeed, the fact that the original Greek simply says “without your Father”, may signify that God is constantly present, and nothing more. In other words, this sentence would underline that the Father is forever caring for all sparrows.

Verse 30 develops this theme nicely: “All the hairs of the head are numbered.” The meaning goes beyond the comforting idea that even the hairs of our heads are accounted for. The principle verb “to count, to number” (*arithmeo*, a derivative of *arithmos* here inflected as *irithmimenai*), means “to employ numbers in determining a quantity”.³⁹ This word suggests that the the numbering of the hairs is a very involved process. In addition, the word all (*pasai*) means “the totality of any object, mass, collective, or extension – 'all, every, each, whole,’”⁴⁰ or “a degree of totality or completeness – 'complete, completely, totally, totality.”⁴¹ These definitions point to even deeper activity. Also, the use of the verb *eisin* (are) at all, and then its placement at the end of the sentence, add emphasis. The idea here is that the Father is very engaged in caring for us.

The final verse (v.31) of our passage might at first glance spell disappointment to the reader: “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” One might say, 'Fine, so now according to the Bible, I'm worth only a finite number of *assaria*, which at two dollars each⁴² does not add up to very much!' There are a number of possibilities here. This verse may be an example of Biblical

37 Louw, p. 793.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 793.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 604.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 597.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 691.

42 Fr. Peter E. Gillquist, Project Director. *The Orthodox Study Bible*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993. p. 844.

understatement. For example, in the Book of Acts of the Apostles 20:7-12, a young man accidentally fell out of a window from the third floor, “and was taken up dead” (v.9). The Apostle Paul said, “Do not be alarmed for his life is in him.” (v.10) The story ends with verse 12: “And they took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted.” Obviously, the people would have been more than ecstatic to see the young man survive the fall!

There is perhaps another, more comforting possibility. The word for “many” in Greek, *pollos*, may actually mean “all” in Aramaic,⁴³ the language that Jesus actually spoke.⁴⁴ (“Aramaic is very close to Hebrew.”)⁴⁵ If this sense is indeed accurate, and the Aramaic meaning is behind the Greek text,⁴⁶ the understanding of scripture is greatly affected. For example, Matthew 20:28 would not read: “...even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (*pollos*).” Rather, with the Aramaic idiom in mind, the verse would say: “...even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for *all*.” Thus, our verse would be understood to be: “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than *all* (*pollos*) sparrows.” (Mt.10:31) That appears to be much more reassuring!

The only parallel is found in Luke, which is slightly different:

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies (*assarion duo*)? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many (or all) sparrows (Lk.12:6-7).

His words appear to reflect the idea that it is better to buy in bulk!⁴⁷ Alternatively, perhaps this evangelist had the homemaker more in mind, since the five sparrows would make a larger and more economical quantity of soup.⁴⁸ In any case, the money involved could well have been a single coin. (See above in the discussion of the *assaria* from Chios.)

The second part of verse 6 is simpler and perhaps a little easier to bear: “And not one of them is forgotten by God.” (Lk.12:6b) as opposed to Matthew's “And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.” (Mt.10:29b). The verb used by Luke is particularly powerful: *epilanthanomai* (here inflected *epilelismenon*) means “to not recall and thus to fail to do something – 'to forget to do, to neglect, to overlook.’”⁴⁹ Thus Luke's version can read: “And not one of them is *neglected* before God.”

In conclusion, both Matthew and Luke are conveying to the reader that God the Father cares about His entire creation, even about little birds. Moreover, He cares much more for us than all the little birds put together. It is interesting, and appropriate, that both gospel-writers use a little coin, the *assarion*, to convey this message.

43 Gillquist, p.56.

44 John S. Kselman. “Modern New Testament Criticism” in *JBC*, Vol II. p.11.

45 Patrick W. Skehan et al. “Texts and Versions” in *JBC*, Vol II .p. 574

46 Kselman, p. 11. “The words of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, definitely show Aramaic influence.”

47 Fox, p. 125.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

49 Louw, p. 349.