

JESUS AND THE MONEY OF HIS DAY

#1. The Widow's Mite: The *Lepton*

This column, as the title indicates, concerns the currency found in Palestine during the time of Jesus, and theoretically in scripture in general.

We've just finished the feast of Christmas, which was an event of history and geography. According to Scripture, Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome (27 B.C.E – 14 C.E. [or 27 B.C. - 14 A.D.]) [Luke (Lk) 2:1] and Herod I the Great, King of Judea (37 – 4 B.C.E.) [Lk 1:5, Matthew (Mt) 2:1].¹ This gives a time and a place to Christ's birth, a defining characteristic of the Books found in the Bible.

Scripture also teaches us about famous historical figures and about the moneys that circulated during these times. Coins of this nature are called “ancients”, ranging from the very first coins in history, around 895 B.C.E., up to 1000 C.E.² Many ancients are still available for collection, and any coin dealer can direct one to sources of these.

This being our first installment, we'll begin with something small: The *lepton*, or popularly called “the widow's mite”³. The *lepton* was the smallest copper coin in the Greek system. Indeed, it was the smallest coin current in Palestine in the time of Jesus,⁴ and thus obviously the smallest coin used by the Jewish people.⁵

There were actually many versions of the *lepton* minted during this Hellenic period. Coinage was abundant during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (105 – 78 B.C.E.), ruler of the Jewish people in Palestine. It had been thought that there were at least 3 mintings, reflecting Alexander's attempt to win popularity with the Jewish people. The first coinage read in Hebrew only “Jonathan the High-Priest and the Confederation of the Jews”. The second had “Jehonathan the King” in Hebrew, and “Alexander the King” in Greek. This coin represents the quarrel Alexander Jannaeus had with “the popular party”, and his appearance as an independent ruler. The final coinage had again in Hebrew only, “Jehonathan the High-Priest and the Jews”. In theory, King Alexander Jannaeus “wished to make the irritated people attached to him”.⁶

After this theoretical structure of A. Jannaeus coinage was presented, there was a discovery of restructured Jewish coins, bearing traces of Greek inscriptions *under* the Hebrew. The theory had to be modified. Now it is believed that there were two mintings, the first featuring four coins, and the second three.

1 The actual year of Christ's birth has been calculated to be around 5-6 B.C.E. {London Numismatic Society Newsletter.(LNSN) “Coins of the Time of Jesus” in *The Canadian Numismatic Official Publication Journal*, Vol.14, No. 3, March 1969, p. 106.} It may seem strange that Christ was “born before Himself”. This was due to a miscalculation introduced around C.E. 525 by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk. Apparently, the miscalculation could have been much worse! {Addison G. Wright et al. “A History of Israel” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (JBC), Vol. II Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. p. 696.}

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. 10.

3 Mite: 2) a modest contribution; the best one can do. 3) any small monetary unit [compare widow's mite]. {Katherine Barber. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 928.}

4 Madden, p. 241.

5 LNSN. p. 106.

6 Madden, p. 65.

The first coinage had “King Jehonathan” in Hebrew with either a half-open flower, a palm branch, or an eight-point star on the obverse. The reverse featured an anchor, (or a flower), surrounded by the inscription “of the King Alexander” in Greek. The second coinage featured in Hebrew only, Jonathan the High Priest and (the Confederation of) the Jews within a wreath of laurel or olive on the obverse, with two cornua-copiae and a poppy-head on the reverse. Evidently, this second minting was struck “after the reconciliation of the king with the Pharisees as he (Alexander Jannaeus) abandons the regal title and recurs to the sacerdotal”.⁷ Again, the coins were a reflection of what was happening in the lives of the rulers.

One of the most memorable Jewish rulers of the period was King Herod I the Great, (37-4 B.C.E.), who was famous for restoring King Solomon's Temple,⁸ and for attempting to destroy the baby Jesus (Matthew [Mt] 2:1-23). Herod I was the first Jewish king to create currency with only Greek inscriptions and no Hebrew.⁹ He minted three versions of the *lepton*: one with anchor and wreath, a second with caduceus¹⁰ and pomegranate, and a third with anchor and two cornucopiae.

Another *lepton* of significance is that coined by Coponius (6-9 C.E.) He “was named first procurator¹¹ of Syria with life and death power in the province of Judea”. It is this coin that is thought to be the Widow's Mite of the New Testament.¹²

Each of the various figures depicted on the coins have their own meanings, for the most part presenting symbols connected with the service of God,, or borrowed from some of the Asmonaeon¹³ coins. For example, the anchor is probably borrowed from the Seleucidae,¹⁴ or alluding to the possession of sea-ports that Alexander Jannaeas had conquered. Another example is that the flowers on Alexander Jannaeas' coins is similar to that on one of Antiochus VIII Epiphanes (one of the Seleucid Dynasty), and may be reminiscent of an alliance between them.¹⁵

At this point, one may be wondering, “where are the effigies on the coins of the various Jewish rulers?” Conspicuous by its absence is the depiction of human beings, and indeed of any living thing. This is due to the fact that this kind of representation was strictly forbidden.¹⁶ The Jewish people followed the Ten Commandments that had been revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai around 1200 B.C.E. Commandment number two says: “You shall not make for yourself a graven¹⁷ image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth...” (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8). Yet, this stipulation, like many of the constituents of the

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-70. {Sacerdotal means “of priests or the priestly office”. {Barber, p.1268.}}

8 LNSN, p.106.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

10 “A staff with a winged top and two serpents coiled around it, especially as carried by Hermes or Mercury.” Barber, p. 198.

11 “A treasury officer in an imperial province.” *Ibid.*, p.1154.

12 LNSN, p. 106.

13 Maccabaeon, a patriotic, faithful, and brave family of the priest Mattathias and his five sons who waged war on those persecuting their Hebrew faith and temple during the second century B.C.E. Madden, p.29-32

14 The dynasty that ruled Syria after Alexander the Great to the second century B.C.E. {Neil J. McEleney, “1-2 Maccabees” in *JBC Vol II*, p.363-366.}

15 Madden, p.67-8, 84.

16 *Ibid.*, p.82; LNSN, p.106.

17 “Engraved”, Barber, p.614.

Hebrew faith, was tolerated by many of the Hellenic and Roman rulers.¹⁸ The Jews were even allowed to mint their own money,¹⁹ without breaking the second commandment.²⁰ However, this freedom was restricted to making only copper coins from the time of Pompey's conquering of Jerusalem.²¹

This brings us back to the smallest of copper coins in Judea, the *lepton*. This humble coin makes an important appearance in the Gospel according to Mark (Mk.12:41-45) and in the parallel in Luke (Lk 21:1-5):

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.” Mk12:41-45.

Interestingly, this passage in Mark uses a total of three references to currency. The first term from the original Greek is *chalkos*²², here translated as “money”: “And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury.” Mk.12:41. *Chalkos* can mean

generally bronze (an alloy of copper and tin), but in some contexts apparently brass (an alloy of copper and zinc), and perhaps in a few instances copper...Most archaeological objects of the Middle East containing consist of bronze, and therefore the most accurate translation of *chalkos* is in most instances a term for bronze, which is harder than brass and much harder than pure copper. Many languages have technical terms for bronze, brass, and copper, but some simply designate bronze as 'brown metal', brass as 'bright metal', and copper as 'red metal'.²³

Perhaps even more relevant to the present discussion, *chalkos* can mean “coins of bronze or copper, and hence of little value.”²⁴ It is significant that Mark used this term, as it will be remembered, the Jewish rulers could mint only copper coins.²⁵ Perhaps he was alluding to the general poverty and oppression of much of the Jewish nation at the time. What makes his choice even more meaningful is that Mark could have used several other options for the word money in this context: *chrama*²⁶, *nomisma* (whence comes “numismatics”), or *kerma*²⁷.

The monetary term that appears second in Mark's passage is our *lepton*, which literally means “small

18 Madden, pp. 22, 40, 82,135, 298.

19 *Ibid.*,p.40.

20 *Ibid.*, p.135.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 82. Pompey lived from 106-48 B.C.E. {Barber, p.1125}

22 “ch” as in German “ch” in *Ach*. {J. Gresham Machen. *New Testament Greek for Beginners*. Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1923. p. 9.}

23 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.27.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

25 Madden, pp. 82, 232.

26 The first “a” is like “a” in “late”. Machen, p. 9.

27 Louw, pp 62-63.

coin”, “a very small coin”, “a coin with very little value”, or “money that was not worth very much”²⁸. Here the term “*lepton*” is translated as “copper coin”: “And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins,...” (Mk.12:42a). This tiny coin was worth only 1/128 of a *denarius*, a *denarius* being the daily wage of a common labourer.²⁹ In the middle ages, a penny a day appears to be the pay of a field-labourer in Europe.³⁰ The modern-day equivalent in Canada, given a minimum wage of \$12.00 per hour for an eight hour day, would be about 75 cents per *lepton*. (Note, however, that these figures reflect much reform in favour of workers over the last 100 years, as well as decades of inflation.) This meagre amount could not even buy one a cheap coffee or a chocolate bar today.

The final monetary reference is the *kodrantas*³¹, which is the Greek equivalent of the Roman *quadrans*³². This title is translated as “a penny”: “And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny.” (Mk.12:42). The *quadrans* was a Roman copper coin worth 1/64 of a *denarius*.³³ There is somewhat of a controversy about the relationship between the *lepton* and the *quadrans*. Some scholars, such as Cavedoni, have suggested that the two are one and the same coin, because he claims that this is what is intimated by St. Mark. However, there is no support for this idea from Mark's text in the original Greek. Furthermore, Madden has explained that the *quadrans* weighed 30 grains, while the *lepton* was 15.44 grains. Thus, as Mark's text outlined, two *leptons* make one *quadrans*: two distinct coins are meant.³⁴

Whatever the case may be, Mark meant to say that the poor widow contributed a very small amount. This is precisely why he used the term “*lepton*”, because it was the smallest coin found in Palestine at that time. This fact is key to the point of this story.

It is also a fact that most widows were very poor at this time and place in history.³⁵ They traditionally did not work outside the home, and without a husband, had no means to support their households. A widow would consider herself blessed if she had a male child who could provide for her. That is the reason that the Evangelist Luke painstakingly paints the picture of the grieving widow of Nain: “...the man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow;...” (Lk.7:12b). This was not only sorrow for the death of her son: This was a cry of desperation! “And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her...” (Lk.7:13a). And Jesus raised the young man from the dead (Lk.7:11-17). How merciful, loving, practical, and dramatic of Him!

Our present story in Mark is also somewhat dramatic. It appears that Christ purposely sat opposite the treasury, specifically to watch the people as they donated. (Mk.12:41) Indeed, when the poor widow came, Jesus called his disciples, dramatically turning her action into an object lesson.(Mk.12:43a)

And what was His lesson? It was that the poor widow, by donating her two *leptons*, gave more than all the rest, because they gave out of their abundance, but she gave all she had. (Mk.12:43b-44). By saying this, Christ recognized her sacrifice and heartfelt sincerity. This action also demonstrated His

28 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

29 Madden, pp. 244-6.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

31 The second “a” is pronounced “a” as in “late”, Machen, p. 9.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 244-6.

33 Louw, p. 63.

34 Madden, pp. 296-298.

35 Thomas W. Leahy, “The Epistle of James” in *JBC, Vol II*, p.372.

kindness to the oppressed: to the poor and to women. Again, Jesus is merciful, loving, and practical.

Luke's version of the story is not quite so dramatic. (Lk.21:1-4)³⁶ Here, the Third Evangelist simply says Christ looked up and saw the people donating. (Lk.21:1) (In other words, there is no strategic positioning opposite the treasury as in Mark.) Interestingly, Luke edits out the term *cholkos* and replaces it with the word *doron* (gift), perhaps because the former is archaic? He also removes the reference to the *quadrans*, possibly because he feels it might be confusing, (see Cavedoni [!]) or that it does not add to the story.

It is important to note the context of this story of the widow's mite. Both Mark and Luke place the account after Christ's diatribe against the hypocrisy of the scribes, who do ostentatious acts, but at the same time “devour widows' houses”.(Mk.12:38-40; Lk.20:45-47). This sets the stage nicely for the story of the poor widow and her sincerity. Both Evangelists also place the story at a significant location: The widow's mite ends the account of Jesus' earthly ministry just before His account of the End of the Age. Because of its location and dynamic, the story of the widow's contribution leaves the reader with a lasting impression.

Indeed, the story has been so memorable, that its popular title, the Widow's Mite, has become part of popular parlance. For a final numismatic tidbit, here is the story of the beginning of a special local charity: In 1921, William Forbes Alloway allocated a gift of \$100,000 to establish The Winnipeg Foundation. In 1924, the Foundation received an envelope labelled “The Widow's Mite” containing its second, but anonymous, gift: three five-dollar gold coins, minted in 1912, being Canada's first gold coins. At that time, those coins were valued at \$15.00, and were modest compared to Alloway's initial contribution. Each of these coins is now valued at \$500 each.

One never knows what can happen when one starts small.

By Esther G. Juce
Acting President,
Manitoba Coin Club Incorporated

36 There are four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the first three being very similar in structure and content, such that they can be alligned in a parallel or synopsis. Thus the first three Gospels are called synoptic Gospels. There seems to be a literary dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark. This order is accepted by most scholars. In other words, Matthew and Luke may have had the Gospel of Mark or parts of Mark in front of them as they were writing their own Gospels. {Frederick Gast. Synoptic Problem in *JBC*, Vol II, p.6.}