

Coins and Early Christianity

American Numismatic Association

Slide Set #23

Biblical Period Coins

Biblical Coins in this Presentation are divided into 3 Broad Categories

- 1) Coins mentioned in the New Testament sufficiently described to allow identification
- 2) Coins struck by individuals who played important roles during the early days of Christianity
- 3) Coins closely associated with this historical period, although not mentioned in the Bible

Biblical Period Coins

During the last century before the common era Rome ruled most of the current Near East, sometimes placing agents in charge of a local territory.

Many different types of coins circulated, i.e., local officials' products, Roman coins of the Emperor, older Greek coins which continued to circulate for decades, perhaps centuries.

Coins consisted of two main patterns:

- Roman, based on the silver denarius and bronze Aes
- Greek, based on the silver drachm and its fractions & multiples

Most Roman territories were prohibited from striking silver or gold coins so their local currency consisted of small bronzes

Old Testament Jews never struck coins, but probably used those struck in nearby countries, for instance, Persia

Augustus Caesar Denarius



Nephew (and heir) of Julius Caesar—Biblical reference is, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.” Thus the birth of Jesus as Mary & Joseph traveled home to be counted and taxed.

Lepton issued under Herod



Bronze Lepton , obverse showing an anchor, and reverse showing a double cornucopia. Herod ordered the killing of all newborns.

Lepton of Archelaus



Bronze Lepton of Herod's son Herod Archelaus, obverse shows a bunch of grapes, reverse shows a plumed helmet and Herod's title, Ethnarch. Mary and Joseph fled to Nazareth because of this ruler's cruelty.

Lepton of Herod Antipas



Bronze Lepton of Herod Archelaus' brother, obverse shows a palm tree with his name and title in Greek (Tetrarch), reverse shows the name of the city of Tiberius which he founded but named after the Emperor. Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded per Biblical accounts.

Lepton of Herod Agrippa



Bronze Lepton of Herod Agrippa (grandson of Herod), placed on the throne by Caligula. Obverse shows an umbrella or canopy and his name in Greek, reverse shows three ears of barley.

Bronze of Herod Agrippa II



Bronze of the last Herodian ruler, Herod Agrippa II, larger than the previous leptons; similar to a Roman Aes. Bust on the obverse is Domitian, the Emperor; reverse features Agrippa's name and a figure of Victory inscribing a shield

Lepton of Pontius Pilate



Bronze lepton of Pontius Pilate, Procurator. These coins were issued in the areas where the Procurators ruled but always carried the name of the Roman Emperor. Obverse has an "lituus" or "augurs' wand" with Tiberius Caesar in Greek surrounding, reverse has a date with wreath surrounding

Widow's Mite Lepton



This coin is considered by many to be the coin tossed into the treasury by the widow as recounted in the New Testament. This coin had originally been minted by Alexander Jannaeus between 103 and 76 BC, but continued to circulate widely at the end of the first century BC. Obverse has an anchor; reverse is either a star or wheel, depending on the authority considered.

Denarius of Tiberius



Called a “penny” in the King James Bible, obverse is bust of Tiberius with his name and title, reverse depicts a seated figure, perhaps of Livia the Emperor’s mother, and a legend pronouncing Tiberius as High Priest of the Roman religion.

One of the 30 Pieces of Silver?



Many old time religious collections described this coin as featuring the face of Christ with his crown of thorns with the reverse picturing the “Rose of Sharon.” However, this is all untrue, but due to a lack of numismatic knowledge during the middle ages. This is a tetradrachm of Rhodes, struck about 300 BC, obverse of Helios, the Sun God, reverse is an allusion to the city of Rhodes.

Tetradrachm of Tyre

Most likely the Judas coin



However, this coin, struck in the city of Tyre, was circulating in large number in Jerusalem and is a more likely culprit; obverse show the face of Hercules Melkarth, reverse has an eagle standing, inscription is the city name. 30 pieces apparently represented 120 days of labor!

Tetradrachm of Antioch



The second choice for one of the 30 pieces of silver is this tetradrachm of Antioch on the Orontes. Obverse has Roman Emperor Augustus; reverse depicts the Tyche of Antioch seated on a rock with personification of the river Orontes swimming at her feet.

Assarion



Another coin mentioned in the New Testament is the “assarion” which is a Greek coin struck at Chios early in the Christian era. The obverse has a seated Sphinx with Greek city name above; reverse has an “amphora” or jug with the name of the coin inscribed in Greek.

Shekel of Israel



“Shekel” was originally a measure, not a coin. Nevertheless, during the first revolt of 66-70 AD, the Jews did issue such a coin. Obverse has a chalice and a Hebrew legend stating “Shekel of Israel” and the date. Reverse has a branch with three buds and the legend “Jerusalem the Holy.”

Imitation Shekels



Originally appearing in the 16th Century, imitation coins were manufactured to resemble real coins, however, they are false and should not be confused with the real coins. This type is called the “censer” because of the central motif; the reverse has a branch surrounded by a legend. Many legends are badly blundered.

Roman Bronze Aes - Nero



Nero persecuted the early Christians, accusing them of burning Rome

Denarius of Titus



Face of Titus on obverse, commemorating his victory after putting down the Jewish revolt of 66-70 AD; reverse has a Jewess seated in mourning beneath a trophy of arms, legend "Iudea" in exergue.

Shekel of 132 AD



In 132 AD, the Jews revolted once again and struck this new shekel; obverse depicts the screen of the Tabernacle with the Ark of the Covenant represented by a building with four columns containing an arched structure. Reverse has a bundle of twigs and a citron.

Three Types of Roman Coins

Antoninianus of
Trajan Decius

Follis of Diocletian

Follis of Galerius



The Christians were persecuted harshly by these three Emperors. Trajan Decius, 249-251 AD, Diocletian, 284-304 AD, & Galerius, 293-305 as Caesar & 305-311 as Augustus. Christians were persecuted because they would not sacrifice to the Emperor which was treason and because they would not serve in the military.

Constantine



Constantine issued an edict after taking power giving Christians equal political status in the empire. Of course, he continued to serve as the Chief Priest of the state religion, issued coins with pagan symbols, and had his wife and son murdered. Pictured are two coins, one with Constantine, the other featuring his favorite reverse, the Sun God.

Magnentius Bronze



The first use of a Christian symbol on a coin as a main type is this bronze piece of the Usurper Magnentius. A Christogram or combination of the Greek letters Chi and Rho, the first letters of Christ's name in Greek is used on the reverse. Obverse is similar to Constantine's coin

Theodosius Silver Siliqua

Missing!

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