



# THE CELATOR®

Vol. 20, No. 10, October 2006



- ***COINING THE NEW TESTAMENT: NUMISMATIC WINDOWS INTO BIBLICAL NARRATIVES***
- ***THE TRIBUTE PENNY DEBATE REVISITED***
- ***A JEWISH TEMPLE ON THE SELA OF BAR KOKHBA: CONSTRUCTION ISSUES AND THE MIRACULOUS SHAMIR***

## The Celator®

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**About the cover:** The Crucifixion of Christ and the suicide of Judas, Rome (?), ca. 425 AD. Courtesy of The British Museum. Photos of a Shekel of Tyre (courtesy of CNG, Inc.) and a Tribute Penny (courtesy of Walter Holt's Old Money).

The Celator office will be closed from October 21<sup>st</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>. Check the "On the Road" section for further details. Office hours are normally Noon to 6PM EST. Please keep in mind that this is a one-person business when you're trying to reach me. Thank you!

# The Tribute Penny Debate Revisited

by Rev. Peter R. Dunstan &  
Walter C. Holt, M.A.

## A reconsideration of the identity of the Tribute Penny

In recent years, there has been considerable debate over the identity of the coin that has come to be known as the Tribute Penny.<sup>1</sup> This was the coin which, according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, was brought to Jesus of Nazareth at his request when he had been asked for his opinion on the issue of paying taxes to Caesar. The purpose of this article is to reflect on both the available numismatic and documentary (e.g. Biblical) evidence and to attempt to develop a more certain identification of the coin in question.



A Tiberius Silver Denarius (RIC Lugdunum 30) (Enlarged photo courtesy of Walter Holt's Old Money.)

The Tribute Penny has, most commonly, been identified as a silver denarius of the emperor Tiberius (14-37

CE), who reigned at the time of the gospel story. Other suggestions include one of the more common silver denarii of Augustus, who reigned from 27 BCE-14 CE (that with the Caesars Caius and Lucius on the reverse), or one of the contemporary silver provincial coins issued in the region local to the stated events, particularly at nearby Antioch.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical passages concerning the identity of the Tribute Penny are located in three separate but related texts within the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. These are reproduced here:<sup>3</sup>

Show me the money for the tax (literally: 'coin of the Census'), and they brought him a denarius. (επιδειξατε μοι το νομισμα του κηνσου. οι δε προσηνεγκαν αυτω δεναριον). And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said "Caesar's." Then he said to them, render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:19-21).

Bring me a denarius, and let me look at it. And they brought one. (φερετε μοι δεναριον ινα ιδω. οι δε ηνεγκαν) And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:15-17)

Show me a denarius. (δειξατε μοι δεναριον) "Whose likeness and inscription has it?" They said "Caesar's." He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's". (Luke 20:24-25)

As may be seen in the above texts, each of the three gospels explicitly states that the coin brought to or shown to Jesus that day in Jerusalem was a denarius, with each text unambiguously using the Greek form of the coin's Latin name (denarius = δεναριον). Matthew gives the added information that Jesus, when initially asked about paying taxes, asks for "το νομισμα του κηνσου"<sup>4</sup> (the coin of the Census). Crucially, however, Matthew then clearly records that what was brought to Jesus was not just any coin, but a denarius (δεναριον). It is the use of this exact term, δεναριον, that is most important.

The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, though considered apocryphal and probably produced in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, also records the story but with the significant, and quite unlikely variation that the coin brought to Jesus was made of gold:

They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, "The Roman emperor's people demand taxes from us." He said to them, "Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, and give me what is mine." (Logion 100).<sup>5</sup>

The above translation is a little misleading as it translates the Coptic word ΔΥΝΟΥΒ as "a gold coin" (other translations read "a gold piece"). Reference to W. E. Crom's *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford 1939) reveals that the word ΝΟΥΒ is actually the word for "gold", but notes that the word can also mean "a coin" or simply "money".

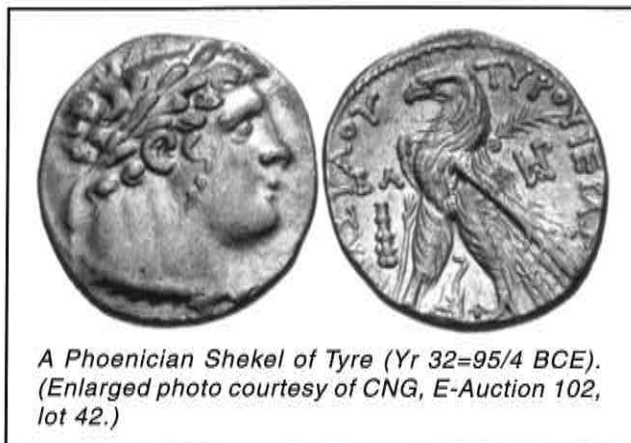
Modern scholarship has established the Gospel of Thomas as a later retelling of this story, written some 150 or more years after the events. With its obvious additions to the earlier gospel versions and its lack of clarity regarding the identity of the actual coin, it is therefore a text that can have little additional bearing on the question of the

identity of the precise coin Jesus held. Little except that if the original meaning was that the coin was made of gold, then it enhances the argument that it must have been a Roman coin as there are no gold coins of this time with a portrait and/or name of an emperor that are not Roman. The alternative translation of simply "a coin" seems more appropriate and is preferred here.

Most current scholarship accepts that Mark's gospel was written first.<sup>6</sup> Whether Matthew and Luke had Mark's gospel before them when they wrote their versions, and if so, to what extent they may have been influenced by it, is the subject of considerable debate. Mark's Gospel is usually dated to the late 50's CE with the Gospels of Luke believed to have been written within the next 10 or 20 years (prior to 70 CE) and Matthew perhaps a further 10 years later and probably after the fall of Jerusalem.

Whatever the actual date of composition, ancient church tradition claims that Mark's primary source was the apostle Peter. Mark, it is thought, was writing for a Roman audience.

Luke, as a colleague of Paul, is believed to have been writing for a Greek audience, whereas ancient tradition asserts that the gospel of Matthew at least owes its origins to the tax-collector come apostle Matthew, whose main audience



*A Phoenician Shekel of Tyre (Yr 32=95/4 BCE).  
(Enlarged photo courtesy of CNG, E-Auction 102,  
lot 42.)*

is believed to have been Jewish. There is the suggestion that Matthew originally wrote in Aramaic. So far, however, no early Aramaic copy of Matthew's gospel has been discovered.<sup>7</sup> This is worthy to note, as knowing the audience for such writings is often just as important as knowing the writer.

It is apparent that the writers of all three gospels believed and understood that their readers, whether Roman, Greek or Jewish, were all familiar with the term "δενάριον" and what a denarius was. Importantly, they used that specific word above all others. It was used not merely because it was a word that was familiar to their intended audience, but because the coin brought to, shown to and held by Jesus was in fact a Roman denarius. The coin's name and identity was known across the empire and was so well known as to become incorporated into the lingua franca of the region (i.e. Greek).

Elsewhere in the gospels of Matthew and of Luke there are explicit references to other Greek denominations, namely: δράχμα (drachma), διδράχμα (didrachma), τετραδράχμα (tetradrachma) and στατήρα (stater).<sup>8</sup> With this it becomes obvious that there was a clear distinction in the writers' minds between a denarius, that very Roman of coins, and a drachma or other denomination of Greek coinage. The



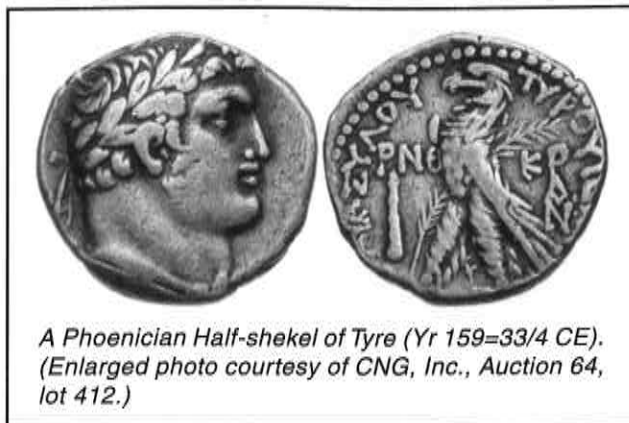
writers were not just offering a familiar and simple term for a coin, as was done with the King James Version of the Bible (1611 CE) which translated the Greek into an equivalent English coin (the silver "penny"). They were writing for an audience that knew which coin was which. They each knew their denarii from their drachmae.

Schurer<sup>9</sup> records that Roman Taxation, especially the poll tax, had to be paid with coins bearing Caesar's portrait while the Temple Tax had to be paid in the coinage of Tyre (Phoenicia), hence the presence of money changers in the outer court of the Jerusalem Temple. What were the money changers doing if not changing Roman denarii for Tyrian shekels?

Of course, other coins were being exchanged as well, but with Jerusalem you have a place that has a large number of visiting travelers and particularly pilgrims. This gathering of people from across the Empire together with a requirement for a tax in one currency and a requirement for offerings to be paid in another would indicate that the money

changers would be changing all sorts of currency just as is done in most airports, banks and market places today.

The presence of pilgrims in Jerusalem, especially at Passover, seems to have been somewhat overlooked in the debate over the identity of the Tribute



*A Phoenician Half-shekel of Tyre (Yr 159=33/4 CE). (Enlarged photo courtesy of CNG, Inc., Auction 64, lot 412.)*

Penny. Until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE, the Jerusalem Temple and hence Jerusalem was a place of annual pilgrimage (like Rome is for Catholics, Mecca is for Muslims, the Ganges for Hindus, etc., and still today Jerusalem remains so for Jews, Christians and Muslims).

Under Old Testament and Levitical Law, Jews were required to make an annual pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple for Passover and as Acts 2:8-11 records, Jews traveled from Rome and all over the known world to Jerusalem at Passover. There had been a significant Jewish population in Rome

from the time of Pompey's triumph in 62 BCE. Pompey had released his Jewish captives after his triumph and they and their families had settled and remained in Rome until the decree of Claudius (41-54 CE) forced their departure.

There were large Jewish populations throughout other parts of the empire as well, as far a field as Gaul and Spain, and in many of the major metropolises including Ephesus, Aphrodisias, Athens and Alexandria. Quite conceivably, they all would have used Roman currency

(i.e. the denarii used in their everyday life in and around these cities) to fund their travel to and lodgings in Jerusalem.

Pilgrims upon coming to the Temple at Passover would pay their annual Temple Tax of a half-shekel having changed their Roman coins into the currency acceptable to the Temple Treasury at one of the many money changers that had on at least one occasion so offended Jesus (John 2:12-16). These were the men who would gladly change a pilgrim's unacceptable coinage (including Roman denarii) into the acceptable Temple coinage for a set or agreed fee. Consequently, apart from common trade, Jerusalem had an independent source of foreign currency, namely the coinage brought in by Jewish pilgrims, from Rome and elsewhere, where Roman denarii, including those issued by Tiberius, were undoubtedly common.

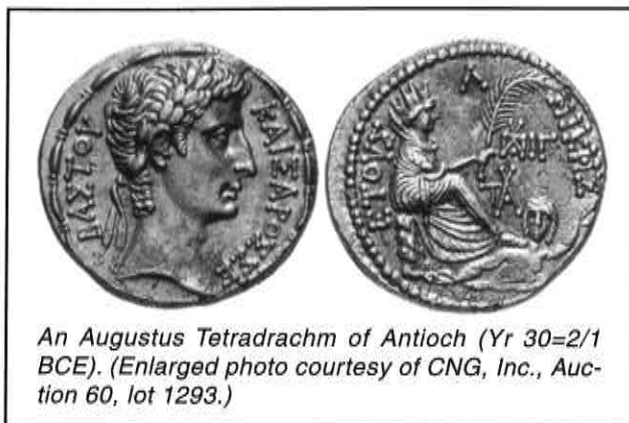
The Gospel accounts indicate that when Jesus asked the question "whose likeness and whose inscription is this" (apparently with the coin in hand), the answer given is "Caesar's." Clearly the coin in his hand was one that had a likeness (read: portrait) and inscription that was recognizable and known, to both the speaker and audience, to be that of "Caesar."

It is in this reference to Caesar that there lies some ambiguity. It is more than likely to be a reference to the ruling emperor, Tiberius, than either his predecessor Augustus or the deified Julius Caesar (each of whom could properly be referred to as "Caesar," though for different reasons).

The recorded text excludes any possibility that the coin was either of the Tyrian denominations (shekel or half shekel = tetradrachm or didrachm) as neither of these had Caesar's portrait or inscription. Nor, for that matter, did any of the Republican denarii (should they be suggested), all of which lack both an appropriate portrait and suitable inscription.

Some of the silver Greek Provincial issues, including those of nearby Antioch in Syria, did in fact have the portrait of Augustus and/or Tiberius, but these were not denarii but the much larger and more valuable tetradrachms. It would seem highly unlikely that Matthew (believed to have been there at the Temple with Jesus on the day in question, and to have been at Antioch and thus well aware of what an Antioch tetradrachm was), Mark (recording Peter, who had also been there) and Luke (recording eyewitness testimony of persons who had been there) would record the coin as a denarius if this were not the case (especially as both Matthew and Luke refer several times to Greek coins by denomination elsewhere in their accounts of the events).

A recently proposed candidate for the Tribute Penny is the tetradrachm of Antioch that has the portrait of Tiberius on the obverse and the portrait of Divus Augustus on the reverse (RPC 4161). Had this been the coin



*An Augustus Tetradrachm of Antioch (Yr 30=2/1 BCE). (Enlarged photo courtesy of CNG, Inc., Auction 60, lot 1293.)*

referred to, then the question asked by Jesus would presumably have been in the plural, "whose portraits," and the word "τετραδραχμα" would have been stated somewhere, exactly as had been done elsewhere in these texts.

The silver tetradrachms (equivalent to 3 denarii) of Augustus from Antioch are uncommon at best, and

the issues of Tiberius are especially rare with only a few examples known for each of the two recorded types. The first Tiberian issue is undated (though assigned to "Early in the reign?") and the second issue, which has Tiberius on the obverse and the Tyche of Antioch with the river-god Orontes on the reverse (RPC 4162), is dated to 35/6 CE, which is after the crucifixion of Jesus, and cannot be the coin referred to in the Gospels. Neither of these coins has been recorded as ever being found in Israel and today both are extremely rare.

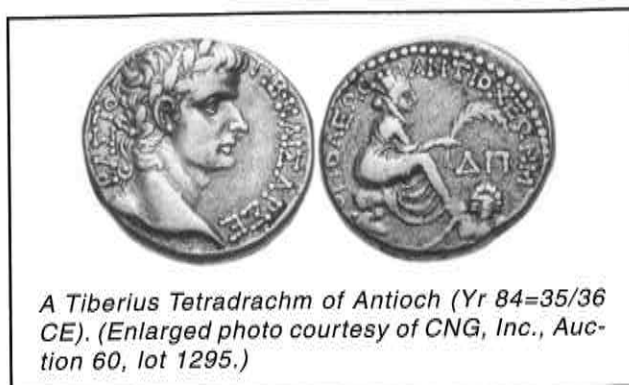
For centuries, the accepted identity of the Tribute Penny has been a denarius of the Emperor Tiberius (14-37 CE). It was struck at the Lugdunum (Lyons) mint, and shows the portrait of Tiberius and "his inscription" on the obverse, and Livia seated and the inscription "Pontif Maxim" on the reverse (RIC 26, 28 and 30). This was the one type of denarius that was issued in great numbers continuously throughout the twenty-three years of

his reign. His other type of denarius (reverse: triumphal quadriga) was only struck briefly at the beginning of his reign and remains quite rare.

The primary objection to this identification is the claim that no imperial denarii have been found in any recorded coin hoard discovered in or near Israel/ Palestine that dates prior to the Jewish War of 66-70 CE. The consequent argument being that Tiberian denarii had not found their way into the Eastern Empire in time for Jesus to have been given one at the Jerusalem Temple some time between 27 CE and 33 CE.

There have been some 152 coin hoards found in or near Palestine of which only fifteen contain coins minted before 60 CE and only eight of these contained silver coinage.<sup>10</sup> None of these hoards contained a Tiberius denarius. Significantly, one of the noteworthy Qumran hoards (discovered in 1955 and buried about 9 BCE) included six mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE Republican denarii amongst a total of 561 silver coins (the remainder being Seleucid tetradrachms and shekels of Tyre).<sup>11</sup>

Another significant hoard of 4500 silver coins (found at Mt Carmel in 1960 and buried about 67 CE) comprised predominantly of Shekels of Tyre mainly dating from 40 BCE to 53 CE (most 20-53 CE), but significantly



*A Tiberius Tetradrachm of Antioch (Yr 84=35/36 CE). (Enlarged photo courtesy of CNG, Inc., Auction 60, lot 1295.)*

included some 160 Roman denarii of Augustus, all of which were the common issue depicting Augustus on the obverse and Caius and Lucius Caesars on the reverse (RIC 207ff.). Leo Kadman<sup>12</sup> suggests that the hoard was a shipment of Temple tax money from northern Palestine or beyond, the hoard being buried when it was found that entry to Jerusalem

and the Temple was blocked by the besieging Roman army.

While there is no hoard evidence supporting the existence of denarii of Tiberius in Palestine, Roman denarii of both Augustus (primarily the Caius & Lucius reverse coin) and particularly Tiberius have been discovered in large numbers in a number of hoards buried far to the east of Palestine during the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, namely in India.<sup>13</sup> This evidence together with the discovery of the Republican denarii at Qumran mentioned above and the presence of the Caius/Lucius Augustan denarii at Mt Carmel makes it difficult to sustain the claim that Roman denarii were absolutely not to be found in Jerusalem at the time required

for the Tribute Penny to be a Roman denarius. The recent discovery, again in India, of a gold aureus of Tiberius in a burial site dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE<sup>14</sup> is further evidence of the rapid westerly movement of Roman silver and gold coinage.

While the recorded hoard evidence indicates that Roman silver denarii of Augustus and particularly Tiberius were scarce in this area, it is highly probable that they were to be found in Palestine in the early to mid circa 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. This conclusion is supported by significant anecdotal evidence of otherwise unrecorded surface finds of Roman denarii, including this type of denarius of Tiberius, having been made in Palestine.<sup>15</sup> None of which takes away from the conclusions of Brooks Levy and others that these denarii "did not circulate much in the Near East," but no one states incontrovertibly that they did not circulate at all.

Why is it then that there are so few Tiberian and Augustan denarii in the region of Judaea datable to an early first century CE context? Perhaps they were not hoarded (they did bear graven images after all). Perhaps they were traded out of the region soon after their use or exchange, straight back to Rome for instance, or used to buy items in trade from passing merchants. Perhaps they were used to buy items from places where the local Judaeans coins were unacceptable for such foreign transactions. Could this silver have been part of the bullion used to strike the first revolt coinage of 66-70 CE?

Perhaps there is a more modern reason: they are melted down for their bullion before getting to market or being studied. Or more probably they

are simply not specifically recorded when found locally (innocently or otherwise) and end up on the market without an additional provenance.

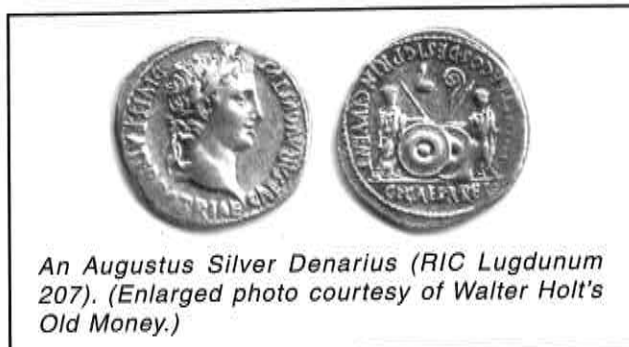
It seems illogical that they are to be found much further east, in fact throughout the empire, and not in Judaea. Too many well respected people, both numismatists and academics, have indicated that local surface/site finds of these coins are known to exist (even though each generally concedes that none are from an archaeologically substantiated context).

### Conclusion

Based on the textual and numismatic evidence available, it seems reasonable to conclude that the well-known Tribute Penny of the gospels was in fact a Roman denarius and not any other Greek Imperial or Roman Provincial issue.

As to exactly which Roman denarius is the coin Jesus held, the situation will continue to be less definite unless more evidence comes to light or further hoards or finds allow added clarification.

The choice would seem to be limited primarily to two coins, a Roman denarius of Augustus, of which the most likely contender would be the common Caius & Lucius Caesar reverse denarius as found in significant



numbers in the 1960 Mt Carmel hoard, or the Livia reverse denarius of Tiberius, who was the reigning emperor at this time.

If we date the story to some time in the years 28-30 CE, then Tiberius had been reigning for some fifteen years, a period which would allow more than enough time for the issue to make its way to Jerusalem, in small numbers at the very least, whether

through trade or perhaps more likely as a result of the annual Passover pilgrimage.

Ultimately, for the coin to have been a Tiberius denarius as is generally accepted, there would only have needed to be one single coin of this type available that day at the Temple in Jerusalem (perhaps "borrowed" from one of the moneychangers).

Consequently, if you want to be sure you have a coin that is of the type of an actual Tribute penny, then collect both a Tiberius denarius with the Livia/Pontif Maxim reverse and an Augustus denarius with the Caius & Lucius Caesar reverse and you will almost certainly possess what you desire – a denarius roughly identical to the one Jesus was shown and held and used to defeat the potentially lethal question of his antagonists – and though highly unlikely, nevertheless theoretically possible, the actual coin.

*About the authors—Rev. Peter Dunstan is the minister of the Hunter Baillie Memorial Presbyterian Church in Sydney, Australia. Now 46, he has*



been collecting coins since he was a child, and ever since he was given his first "Tribute Penny" by his father as an ordination present, he has focused strongly toward Biblical and related coins. He is an active member of the Australian Numismatic Society and the Australian Society of Ancient Numismatics (ASAN).

**Walter Holt** is one of Australia's specialists in ancient Greek and Roman numismatics. He received his Master's Degree in ancient history from Sydney's Macquarie University in 2002, following a career in Law Enforcement with the New South Wales Transit Police. Walter is a member of the ANA, the ANS, ASAN, and a contributor to the Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies (ACANS) at Macquarie University. He has written articles for *The Celator*, the *American Journal of Numismatics* (AJN 15), and *Australian Coin & Banknote Magazine*, with several others to be published in the future. He is also nearing completion of a book on the genealogies of ALL Emperors, Caesars and Usurpers of the Roman period (Caesar to Anastasius), as well as condensed biographies for all of the significant figures (male and female).

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Tribute Penny is so named because of the reference to it as a "penny" in the King James Version of the Bible. The word "δενάριον" or "denarius", the standard Roman coin of those times, was translated from the Greek and Latin to the word for a standard silver coin that was regarded as the closest equivalent in the English language of the time (1611 CE).

<sup>2</sup> P. Lewis and R. Bolden, *The Pocket Guide to St. Paul* (Kent Town {Australia} 2002) pp. 9-24.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, Greek English Edition of the *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 6th Edition (Stuttgart 1983), p. 246; The wording of these texts is taken from their Greek originals and is confirmed in a number of early manuscripts including Codex Alexandrinus (ca. 4th century CE) and a number of papyri, some dating from the 2nd century CE (e.g. Papyri 45 for Mark Chapter 14).

<sup>4</sup> κηνσος; translates to "census, an assessment: tribute" (Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Abridged Edition, (Oxford 1997)).

<sup>5</sup> R. McL. Wilson, *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (Mowbray 1960) p. 59; Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, "The 'Scholars' Translation" of the Gospel of Thomas," *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (Sonoma 1994). <http://www.misericordia.edu/users/davies/thomas/Trans.htm>. (February 2006).

<sup>6</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids 2002) pp. 41-45.

<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Leicester 1992) pp. 1-17.

<sup>8</sup> Aland, op.cit. Matthew 17:24-27, and op.cit. Luke 15:8.

<sup>9</sup> Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: Clark 1986/87) Vol. II, p. 274; p. 603.

<sup>10</sup> M. Waner & Z. Safrai, "A Catalogue of Coin Hoards and the Shelf life of Coins in Palestine Hoards during the Roman and Byzantine Periods," *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*, Liber Annuus 51 (Jerusalem 2001) pp. 305-336.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/deadsea.scrolls.exhibit/Community/coins.html>, *Dead Sea Scrolls: Coins*. (February 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Leo Kadman, "Temple Dues and Currency in Ancient Palestine in the Light of Recently Discovered Coin-Hoards", Leo Kadman, Ed., *Israel Numismatics Journal* (Jerusalem 1962).

<sup>13</sup> Paula J. Turner, *Roman Coins from India*, RNS Special Publication No.22 (London 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Peter K. Tompa, Guest Editorial: Afghan Treasures Lost and Found, *The Celator*, Vol.19 No.4, April 2005, (Lancaster 2005) p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Personal Communication with David Hendin of Amphora Coins, New York, 2004.