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THE TRIBUTE PENNY IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

By Peter E. Lewis

The Tribute Penny is the name numismatists give to the coin which Jesus held when he made his pronouncement, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". It is called a penny because in the Authorized King James Version of the Bible written in 1611 the Greek word for denarius, δηνάριον, is translated as penny. The story of the Tribute Penny is found in all three synoptic Gospels: Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17, and Luke 20:20-26. Modern Biblical scholars consider that Mark wrote his Gospel first, probably with a later editing which added a few details, and that Matthew and Luke used the first edition of Mark as their major source. The episode is related by Mark as follows:

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.¹

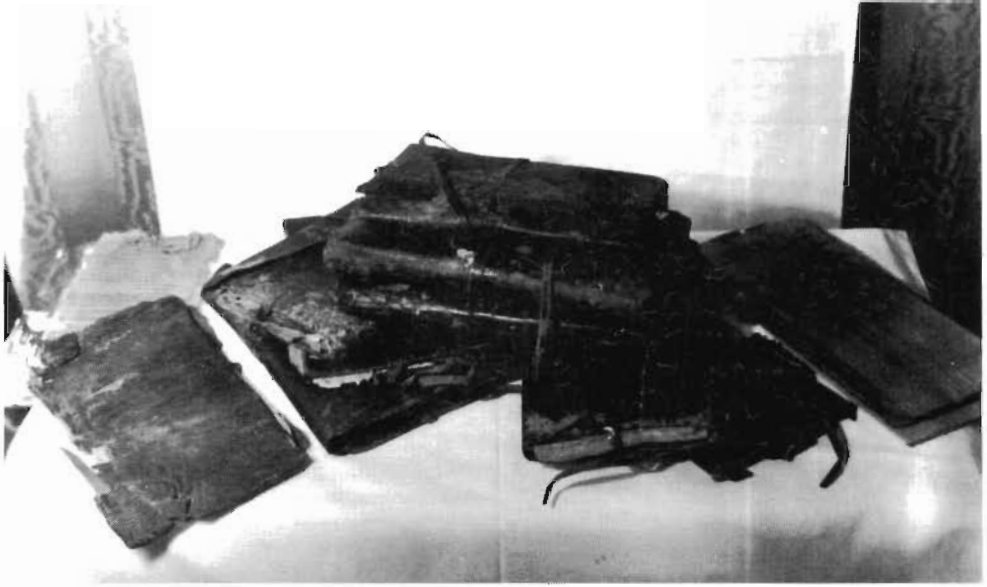
In the previous article it was argued that the coin which Jesus actually held was RPC 4161², a tetradrachm of Antioch with the laureate head of Tiberius on the obverse with

the inscription ΤΙΒΕΡΙΟΣ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ (Tiberius Augustus Caesar), and on the reverse the radiate head of Augustus with the inscription ΘΕΟΣ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ (God Augustus Caesar). Briefly the argument ran as follows: Mark used the word δηνάριον because he was writing for an audience in Rome who was familiar with this coin. No denarii circulated in Judaea in Jesus' time. The coin which Jesus held had the emperor's head on it and was used for paying the Roman tax in the province of Syria of which Judaea was part. Jesus would have been referring to the reigning emperor, Tiberius. Only one silver coin was issued by Tiberius from Antioch during the lifetime of Jesus: RPC 4161.

In the article it was pointed out that RPC 4161 was blasphemous as far as the Jews were concerned. Nothing like it had been seen in Syria since the time of Antiochus IV (215-164 B.C.) when the Maccabean War began. If RPC 4161 was the Tribute Penny it must have been the initiating cause of the whole episode which led to Jesus' pronouncement and not just an incidental prop used by Jesus. The Jewish leaders must have brought RPC 4161 to Jesus.

The episode of the Tribute Penny, however, also occurs in another ancient document, the Gospel of Thomas. The aim of the present article is to consult this ancient source and test the hypothesis outlined above against the evidence to be found there. But first some information about the Gospel of Thomas will be given.

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings purportedly spoken by Jesus. There



*The Nag Hammadi Codices in 1949 prior to their conservation in plexiglass
(Photo: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, California).*

are 114 brief sayings as well as a prologue and a title (which occurs at the end). Although apparently simple and even nonsensical at times, the sayings have been carefully thought out and structured. There is no narrative linking the sayings, but they are connected by catchwords; for example, Saying 100 is connected to Saying 101 by the word “give” which occurs in both. This suggests that they were originally an oral collection and the catchwords aided memory. Each saying usually begins with “Jesus said”.

Recently Hans-Martin Schenke³ has argued that the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of Jesus’ sayings excerpted from a commentary such as the five-volume work by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia in the early second century. Papias wrote a commentary on Jesus’ sayings, using unwritten traditions from the circles of the early church. Only fragments of Papias’ work survive. Schenke states, “We might

explain the Gospel of Thomas, in terms of its origin, as a collection of sayings excerpted from a commentary on them”. If the Gospel of Thomas does derive from Papias’ work, then the sayings have a venerable ancestry, being recorded by Papias after having been preserved orally by elders of the early church.

The Gospel of Thomas first came to the notice of the modern world in 1897 when B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt published some fragmentary documents which they had discovered during excavations at Oxyrhynchus, an ancient city 200 kilometres south of Cairo. From the fragments twenty sayings as well as the Prologue can be discerned although there are many gaps in the text. The sayings are in Greek which is dated palaeologically to about 200 A.D. This, of course, may not be the date when the collection was first committed to writing.

In 1945 in Upper Egypt near the modern village of Nag Hammadi a peasant accident-

tally discovered a cache of twelve leather-bound papyrus books, and a fragment of a thirteenth. They contained about 51 individual writings, one of which was the complete Gospel of Thomas. It was written in Sahidic Coptic, the dialect of Coptic used in Upper Egypt. It was a translation of the original Greek text. The books were manufactured in the middle of the fourth century, but the date of the first edition of this Coptic Version of the Gospel of Thomas is debatable. It was probably written in the third century as Antony (251-356 A.D.) read the synoptic Gospels in Coptic.

The Coptic Version is similar but not identical to the Greek. The Prologue reads, "These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded."⁴ Saying 1 reads, "And he said, 'Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.'" Right at the outset we are informed that it is secret information which is being given and an effort is required to understand it, but success will bring spiritual rewards. This suggests that we are dealing with a form of gnostic⁵ writing and there is no doubt that there is a gnosticizing tendency throughout the Gospel of Thomas. But it does not have all the features typical of the gnostic literature which flourished in the second century and it is best not to categorize it in this way.

Scholars are divided about the date when the first Greek edition⁶ was written. At one end of the scale S.L. Davies⁷ proposes 50-70 A.D. while at the other end E.M. Yamauchi⁸ suggests about 140 A.D. Richard Valantasis⁹ argues for 100-110 A.D. It was probably written in Syria, more specifically in the area around Edessa, because A.F.J. Klijn¹⁰ has shown that the name Judas Thomas belonged distinctively to eastern Syria. It seems that it was written for

ascetic Christians who wandered about the countryside visiting small communities, as in Luke 10:1-12 (c.f. Thomas 14:4). These itinerant preachers advocated a radical way of life which repudiated family, money, and even clothes.

The fragments of the Greek version from Oxyrhynchus do not contain the episode about the Tribute Penny, but the Coptic Version does. Saying 100 reads, "They¹¹ 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.'" The surprising features here are that the denarius of the synoptic Gospels has been changed into a gold coin, and Jesus has added a third imperative, "Give me what is mine".

What does this third imperative mean? S.J. Patterson¹² considers that the second sentence in Saying 100 is addressed to the potential supporters of the itinerant ascetics: "Jesus here becomes the prototypical beggar. He refuses to sympathize with the interlocutors' longing for 'less government' and demands instead support also for himself; and this with an authority and at a level on a par with state levies on the one hand and the Temple tax¹³ on the other! The resulting donation probably seldom matched the weight of the claims." Unfortunately, in his otherwise excellent work, Patterson seems to have missed the point here. These are secret sayings the interpretation of which leads the seekers into the living presence of Jesus. "Give me what is mine" means to give Jesus the attention that his presence in the sayings demands. This attention includes the effort to understand the sayings as well as the performance of the mode of living which this understanding dictates.



Page 51 of Nag Hammadi Codex II showing the title of the Gospel of Thomas
(Photo: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, California).

Valantasis¹⁴ comes nearer the mark when he writes, "What belongs to Jesus is the community of those who have entered a relationship with him through hearing and responding to the sayings." It is probably not appropriate, however, to think in terms of community when dealing with these solitary Christian seekers. These seekers were certainly not interested in money. Their wealth consisted in knowing themselves: "If you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty"(Thomas 3:5). Anyone who handles money is doomed: "Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father"(Thomas 64:12). If you have money, get rid of it: "[Jesus said], 'If you have money, don't lend it at interest. Rather, give [it] to someone from whom you won't get it back'" (Thomas 95).

It is obvious that whoever added "Give me what is mine", also changed the coin into a gold one. He did this to emphasize the difference between what the world esteems and what Jesus demands. Jesus demands the attention of the reader of the sayings. This leads to the seeker giving everything, including himself, to Jesus. In giving his all to the living presence of Jesus in the sayings, he "will not taste death". Valantasis¹⁵ is correct in stating that Saying 100 characterizes Caesar and his people as the world from which the seekers withdraw.

At this point the objection could be made that contrary to what the synoptic Gospels say, the coin which Jesus held really was a gold one. Numismatically this is possible because an aureus of Tiberius has been found in excavations in Jerusalem¹⁶. Although Judaea in the first century was a poor country there were rich Jews in the Diaspora, and gold would have been the most convenient form in which to send money to

Jerusalem in order to pay the taxes for the upkeep of the Temple. In 59 B.C. a former governor of Asia, Lucius Valerius Flaccus, was charged in Rome with refusing to permit Jews in Asia to export large amounts of gold¹⁷. According to Josephus¹⁸ the right of the Jews of Asia to send money to Jerusalem was reaffirmed by an edict of Augustus in 2/3 A.D. No doubt considerable numbers of aurei were struck under Augustus and Tiberius¹⁹ and these circulated throughout the Roman empire²⁰ in the spheres of high finance.

Although there would have been some rich Jews living in Judaea, e.g. the Herodian and priestly families, the aureus would have been remote from the ordinary people. They would certainly not have paid the Roman tax with it, and in Saying 100 the coin is linked with the paying of taxes. In any case why should a group of Jews show such a coin to Jesus? There is no suggestion anywhere that the coin would be given to him! All things being considered the proposition that the actual Tribute Penny was an aureus seems indefensible. Much more likely is the proposition that the silver coin was changed to a gold one when the third imperative was added to Jesus' original pronouncement. It is hard to imagine the historical Jesus saying, "Give me what is mine". These changes were probably made when the gnosticizing tendency in Thomas Christianity became stronger as the itinerant ascetics found themselves opposed by elements in the settled Christian communities which they visited. To counter increasing alienation by these communities the ascetics found solace in gnostic claims to esoteric understanding and divine election. So it would have been in this later stage of Thomas Christianity that the changes were made to either the oral or written form of Saying 100. This probably occurred in Syria, in the region of



The common aureus of Tiberius. It is similar to the denarius, with the laureate head of Tiberius on the obverse, and the seated figure of Livia on the reverse. The inscription is the same, and includes DIVI AVG. F. (Son of the Divine Augustus). It would have circulated throughout the Roman Empire. Magnification x4.5. Actual diameter 18 mms. Author's collection, photographed by Mr John Mead.



The Tribute Penny. This is the specimen in the Museum of the American Numismatic Society in New York. It weighs 15.01 grams. Magnification x2.

Edessa, in the early second century A.D.

Deleting the changes made to Saying 100, we are left with the following basic skeleton of the Tribute Penny incident: Some outside people bring a coin and show it to Jesus. They complain to him about the Roman tax. Jesus then makes a pronouncement which settles the matter.

Even with this small amount of information it is possible to make certain deductions about the coin. Firstly it must have been available during the ministry of Jesus. Secondly it was special in some way for people who were not disciples to bring it to Jesus for his comment. The precise significance of this special coin may not have been known to the writer of the Gospel of Thomas because he does not explain it. Even if he did know that the coin upset the Jews because of the Roman emperors' claim to divinity, it would have been dangerous to criticize the Roman imperial system in Syria at this time²¹. It was

expedient and in keeping with his theological perspective to record the incident in the way he did. Similarly Mark used the episode for his own purposes, to portray the Jews trying to trap Jesus. The coin was such that it prompted a discussion about paying taxes to the Romans and led to Jesus making a statement emphasizing a distinction between Caesar and God. No coin fits this situation except the blasphemous coin, RPC 4161. It can therefore be concluded that the information in the Gospel of Thomas supports the thesis that the Tribute Penny is RPC 4161. Conversely RPC 4161 indicates that in its original form Saying 100 reflects a true and independent witness to an historical incident in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

END NOTES

1. The Holy Bible, New International Version, International Bible Society, 1980.
2. RPC is an abbreviation for "Roman Provincial Coinage" by Burnett, A., Amandry, M., and Ripolles, P.; British Museum Press and Bibliotheque Nationale, London and Paris, Volume 1, 1992.
3. Schenke, H.-M., "On the Compositional History of the Gospel of Thomas", Occasional Papers of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, number 40, 1998.
4. The translation of the Coptic text used in this article is that found in "The Gospel of Thomas" by Richard Valantasis; Routledge, London and New York, 1997. This translation is known as the Scholars Version.
5. Gnosticism is the term applied to those religious movements in the early Christian centuries which stressed salvation through secret knowledge (gnosis). Some scholars do not use the term unless there is a cosmological dualism between the spiritual world and the evil, material world. Some scholars perceive the term to have pejorative overtones and do not use it at all, as S.L. Davies explains: "As the term 'heresy' became one which scholarship decided not to use, the term 'gnostic' has come to serve as a substitute."
6. James E. Robinson (in "Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity", edited by Hedrick, C.W. and Hodgson, R.; Hendrickson, Peabody, 1986, page 162) points out that if the text of the Gospel of Thomas was never stable, but continued its own life throughout the whole period from the earliest sources imbedded in it down to the copying of the Gospel of Thomas in the Nag Hammadi book, one must reconceptualize the procedures for dating: rather than the whole text of the Gospel of Thomas being read synchronically, so that all the sayings contribute to establishing the one date of authorship and all the sayings are interpreted in terms of that one dating, one must learn to read diachronically, placing the individual sayings and indeed specific traits in them along the trajectory of the life of the text. So in talking about the date of the first Greek edition we are referring only to "a major compositional activity in the trajectory" of the sayings collection.
7. Davies, S.L., "The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom"; Seabury Press, New York, 1983, page 146.
8. Yamauchi, E.M., "Apocryphal Gospels" in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume 1; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979, page 186.
9. Valantasis, R., "The Gospel of Thomas"; Routledge, London and New York, 1997, page 13.
10. Klijn, A.F.J., "John XIV 22 and the Name Judas Thomas", in "Studies in John Presented to Prof. J.N. Sevenster On the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday", pages 88-96; Supplements to Novum Testamentum 24; Brill, Leiden, 1970.
11. In the Gospel of Thomas "they" refers to outside persons. The disciples are referred to as "the disciples".
12. Patterson, S.J., "The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus"; Polebridge Press, Sonoma, CA, 1993, page 137.
13. Patterson (op. cit. page 149, footnote 117) suggests that in Thomas' three-stich version of this saying it seems entirely plausible that the second stich ("Give to God what belongs to God") originally referred to the Temple tax system. It seems plausible for the three-stich version, although the Temple tax system after 70 A.D. is a complex area. It is not plausible for the two-stich version as Jesus' pronouncement would then have no significance apart from telling the Jews to pay the Roman tax and the Temple tax. The fact that his words are recorded in both Mark's Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas suggests that originally he intended something more. His comment was considered to be very clever at the time as the hearers were amazed, according to the writer of Mark's Gospel. Jesus was throwing the whole problem of what is God's back to the questioners.
14. Valantasis, op. cit., page 181.
15. Ibid.
16. Ariel, D.T., "A Survey of Coin Finds in Jerusalem" in "Liber Annus", 1982, page 314.
17. Cicero, "Pro Flacco", 66-69.
18. Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews", 16:163.
19. Tiberius issued only one aureus (Sear 565). It also would have been a blasphemous coin as far as the Jews were concerned because it names Tiberius as the son of the divine Augustus (DIVI AVG. F.); but the inscription is in Latin and very few Jews would have been able to read Latin in Judaea in the time of Jesus.
20. According to Andrew Burnett ("Coinage in the Roman World"; Seaby, London, 1987, page 49) the production of Roman aurei "established the circulation of gold throughout the empire. The aureus was, indeed, the only truly imperial coin of the Roman world; it was the sole gold coin in circulation, and it circulated freely everywhere, even in the otherwise closed province of Egypt." No gold coins were minted in the great Parthian empire to the east.
21. The emperor Domitian ruled from 81 to 96 A.D. He insisted on being addressed as "dominus et deus", master and god. Christians and Jews were persecuted for refusing to give him divine honours.