

Six Caesars of the Tribute Penny

(c) 1995-2000 by Michael Marotta (*see footnote*)

Sellers of ancient coins push out Roman denarii struck by Tiberius on the theory that these are the "tribute penny" mentioned in the Book of Matthew at 22:16 and Mark at 12:13 and Luke 20:22. They may well be. They are not the only candidates. In fact, they are not even the most likely.

Octavius struck coins with the inscription IMP CAES from 28 BC. He died in 14 AD, 42 years later. He struck hundreds of types of denarii, far more than Tiberius who was old when he took the office and who was politically conservative. Since Octavius Augustus struck much more silver than did Tiberius, it is more likely that the "tribute penny" carried the likeness of the earlier ruler.

The January, 1996, issue of *The Celator*, featured Harvey Shore's "The Real 'Tribute Penny'." His thesis was that the Caius/Lucius issue of Augustus was the most common type of denarius at the time of Jesus' ministry. This is not a new theory.

The December 1987 issue of *World Coins*, carried Robert Leonard's "A Numismatic Illustration of the Bible." Speaking of the Tiberius/Livia, he said, "This coin is usually considered to be the Tribute denarius simply because it is the commonest denarius of this reign...A more probable candidate is the denarius of Augustus with reverse Caius and Lucius Caesars...it has been found frequently in Israel, while at one time the Tiberius denarius was thought to be almost unknown there...."

The historian Michael Grant also agrees that the Caius/Lucius denarius of Augustus is the best guess for the Tribute Penny of the Bible.

In the July 1999 issue of *The Australian Journal of Numismatics*, Peter E. Lewis marshals a case for a tetradrachm of Antioch cataloged as SNG Copenhagen 144 (Syria). This coin has "Caesar" on both sides: Augustus and Tiberius. The inscription for Augustus calls him "theos" or "god" a clear abomination to the Jews. Also, this coin was about twice the diameter of a denarius and made a good demonstration piece for an encounter on the street.

In the ancient world all silver coins passed by weight. There is no reason to assume that only the coins of the current ruler were accepted as good metal. Money changers worked in the Temple because so many types of coins circulated on the streets. In addition to shekels of Tyre and drachmas from Antioch and Pontus, there were many kinds of Roman denarii.

Tiberius issued coins with the portrait and inscription of Augustus Caesar, Drusus Caesar, and Germanicus Caesar. In fact, all of these types were struck by the imperial mint at Caesaria (Eusebeia) in Cappadocia and would be more likely to be current in and around Jerusalem.

Caius Caesar was the adopted son of Agrippa Lucius and Julia, the daughter of Julius Caesar. Caius was formally adopted by Octavius Augustus in 17 BC. Among his coins is one catalogued as Sydenham 38 (Cohen 2). The obverse shows the head of Caius facing right inside an oak wreath. The inscription reads CAESAR. On the reverse is the word AVGVST and an altar. Sydenham says that these denarii are "not of Roman fabric" and were probably "struck in the East."

Germanicus was another "Caesar" who was active in the East immediately before the ministry of Jesus. A nephew of Tiberius, Germanicus served at Antioch in Syria. He was poisoned in 19 AD.

Of all the many Caesars whose image and superscription appeared on coins, Julius Caesar must not be forgotten. Once he was dead, he was immensely popular with everyone. He coined tons of denarii to pay his troops. He was active across the entire empire, especially, of course, at Alexandria where he involved Rome in the politics of Egypt.

Marc Antony's coins are also a possibility for the "tribute penny." While not a "Caesar," Antony definitely had imperial aspirations. Unlike Brutus, he was not a republican, but an opportunist. He issued denarii to pay his troops with the inscriptions ANTONY IMP, ANTONY AVG, and ANTONY AVG IMP. Among his issues are coins struck during his alliance with Octavian Caesar. With these coins (Crawford 517/8 and Sydenham 1188), it possible for one person to see the image of Antony while another person sees the superscription of Caesar and vice versa.

Coin dealers let Christians bid up the prices on the Livia- as-Pax denarii of Tiberius. However, there is no such thing as a "real tribute penny." In fact, a set of possible tribute pennies would include the coins of six Caesars. If you only want one that is statistically the more likely, then the coin you need is the Caius/Lucius of Augustus.

*NOTE: A few obvious errors in spelling and grammar in the original work have been corrected such as the following:
"... marshalls a case for..." and "...this coins was about twice the diameter..."*

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