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PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF NUMISMATISTS

Thirty pieces of silver

by Greg Magee *Special to The Clarion*

In the bustling courts of the Second Temple, a dramatic scene unfolded that numismatists and biblical scholars alike still ponder. Jesus of Nazareth entered the sacred precincts during Passover and overturned the tables of the money changers, driving out those buying and selling with a whip of cords. “My house will be called a house of prayer,” he declared, quoting the prophets, “but you are making it a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:12-13).



“Christ Driving the Money-Changers from the Temple” (Matthew 21:12-13) by Dutch painter Pieter Aertsen (1508-1575)

Far from a mere outburst, this act targeted a system rooted in the very coins that defined first-century Jewish religious life—the silver shekel of Tyre. These tetradrachms were not ordinary currency. Their exceptional purity made them the only acceptable medium for the annual Temple tax and sacrificial offerings. The money changers profited by exchanging debased foreign or local coins for these prized Tyrian issues, frequently at exorbitant rates. Pilgrims from across the empire had no choice but to pay the premium, turning a place of worship into a marketplace of exploitation. Jesus’ zeal exposed this corruption, but the shekel itself endures as tangible proof of the economic and religious world the Gospels describe with striking precision.

Numismatists prize the Tyrian shekel for its consistent specifications and historical span. Struck initially in the Phoenician port city of Tyre from about 126/125 BC to around 19 BC, production likely shifted to Jerusalem under Herod the Great after he completed the Temple expansion. These coins weigh approximately 14 grams and measure roughly 27-29 millimeters in diameter. Metallurgical analysis confirms an astonishing silver fineness of 94% or higher often approaching 97% in earlier issues. Early examples exhibit refined Hellenistic artistry: a concave flan with sharp details. Later “Herodian” issues, marked by a KP or KAP monogram behind the eagle (possibly denoting “Kratos Romaion,” or Roman authority), appear flatter, thicker, and slightly cruder, reflecting local minting techniques and the demands of Temple supply until minting ceased with the First Jewish Revolt in 66 AD.

The obverse features the laureate head of Melkart (the Phoenician deity equated with Greek Heracles), a bearded, muscular figure facing right, a pagan image that might seem incongruous for Jewish use. The reverse shows an eagle standing on the prow of a ship, palm branch in wing, with the Greek inscription ΤΥΡΟΥ ΙΕΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΣΥΛΟΥ (“of Tyre the holy and inviolable”). Dates appear in the Phoenician or Seleucid era, alongside the club symbol. Despite the imagery, rabbinic authorities accepted these coins because of their intrinsic value and purity mattered more than iconography for sacred transactions. No other silver coin matched this reliability; Gresham’s Law in reverse favored the “good money” for holy purposes.

This preference explains the money changers’ tables. Every adult Jewish male over age 20 owed an annual half-shekel Temple tax (Exodus 30:11-16), roughly 7 grams of pure silver, for the upkeep of the sanctuary and atonement rituals. The didrachm (half-shekel) or full stater (tetradrachm, covering two people) fulfilled this exactly. Foreign coins, tainted by lower fineness or idolatrous por-

traits, required conversion. Changers operated openly in the Temple’s outer court, especially during festivals when thousands of pilgrims converged. Their fees inflated costs for animals and offerings too, benefiting the Sadducean elite who controlled the



▲ This amazing example of a Tyrian shekel was graded Ch AU with a 5/5 strike and 4/5 surface by NGC. It sold for \$11,400 at Heritage in August 2025. Images courtesy Heritage Auctions

Temple economy. Jesus' cleansing was no random protest; it condemned a system that commodified faith while clinging to the very coins bearing a graven image.

The shekel's role extends to one of the New Testament's most infamous transactions: Judas Iscariot's betrayal. For "thirty pieces of silver," the chief priests secured Judas' agreement to hand over Jesus. (Matthew 26:14-15). Numismatists overwhelmingly identify these as Tyrian shekels — thirty tetradrachms totaling about 420 grams of near-pure silver.



▲ "The Thirty Pieces of Silver" by Hungarian painter Janos Pentelei Molnar (1878-1924)

This sum held deep symbolic weight. Exodus 21:32 set thirty shekels as the compensation price for a slave gored by an ox... the valuation of a life deemed cheap. Zechariah 11:12-13 had prophesied a shepherd receiving this "handsome price" in scorn, only to cast it to the potter in the house of the Lord. Judas later returned the blood money in remorse; the priests, deeming it unclean, used it to buy a potter's field (Matthew 27:3-10). Archaeological hoards and isolated finds across Judea and Galilee confirm these shekels circulated precisely in Jesus' lifetime, matching the Gospel's economic details.

Perhaps the most intimate numismatic miracle involves the same coin type. In Capernaum, Temple tax collectors approached Peter: "Does your teacher not pay the t w o - d r a c h m a tax?" (Matthew 17:24). Jesus, knowing the inquiry, first taught a lesson in divine sonship. Earthly kings exempt their own children from tribute; as the Son of God, Jesus was free. Yet, "So that we may not offend them," he instructed Peter to cast a hook into the sea. The first



▲ Pleasing coins like this XF-40 from ANACS can be obtained around \$2,000. This one sold for \$2,040 in May 2025. Worn specimens for the type collector can be had for a few hundred dollars. Images courtesy Heritage



Each [Tyrian shekel], whether an elegant early Tyre issue or a pragmatic Herodian example, carries the weight of sacred history.

fish caught would hold a full Tyrian shekel in its mouth. Peter was to pay it for both teacher and disciple (Matthew 17:27). This tetradrachm covered the exact half-shekel obligation for each.

Jesus could have asserted exemption verbally, claiming messianic status outright. Instead, he demonstrated divinity through sovereign knowledge and creative power. He foresaw the precise fish, directed its path, and placed the exact coin, pure, Temple-approved silver, inside its mouth. No human explanation suffices: the miracle underscores Jesus' lordship over nature while honoring the law's letter. For numismatists, this passage gains vividness when holding an actual shekel. The stater Peter retrieved was no generic coin; its weight, purity, and design aligned perfectly with the Temple's rigorous standards.

These artifacts bridge the ancient world and modern scholarship. Excavations in Jerusalem's Old City and surrounding regions have yielded Tyrian shekels in contexts tied to first-century Jewish life, including hoards near Qumran and Temple-related sites. Stylistic shifts and monograms corroborate the Jerusalem mint hypothesis advanced by scholars like Ya'akov Meshorer. The coin's cessation in 66 DA coincides with the revolt's outbreak and the rise of purely Jewish shekels inscribed "Shekel of Israel and Holy Jerusalem." Such convergence affirms the Gospels' portrayal of a Temple economy reliant on these precise issues.

For collectors, the Tyrian shekel offers more than investment potential. Each specimen, whether an elegant early Tyre issue or a pragmatic Herodian example, carries the weight of sacred history. Obverse Melqart gazes across two millennia; reverse eagle recalls Tyre's seafaring might repurposed for Jerusalem's altar. In an age of skepticism, these coins stand as silent witnesses. They circulated in the hands of pilgrims, priests, betrayers, and disciples. They funded the very Temple Jesus cleansed and paid the tax he

miraculously supplied. Through their purity, distribution, and biblical integration, the silver shekels of Tyre testify that the New Testament narratives rest on a verifiable historical and economic foundation. For the numismatist of faith or curiosity, holding one is to touch a coin that once bore witness to incredible events that changed the world.

