

The Widow's Mite: A century-long advertisement for the birth of Christ?

by Greg Magee *Special to The Clarion*

The world of ancient numismatics often conceals layers of historical and theological significance beneath its surface. Among these are the "Widow's Mite" prutah coins of Alexander Jannaeus, a Maccabean king who ruled from 104 BC to 76 BC. These coins, minted approximately a hundred years before the birth of Christ, may have served as a century long advertisement for the coming "Star of Bethlehem."

Alexander Jannaeus was a king of remarkable ambition and military prowess. His reign, marked by extensive territorial conquests, was intended to restore the grandeur of the Maccabean dynasty to the level of King David's rule. His rule, however, was not without internal strife. The Pharisees, representing the religious establishment of the time, opposed Jannaeus's authority, leading to a prolonged and bloody conflict. The tension climaxed during the Feast of Tabernacles in 95 BC, when Jannaeus was publicly humiliated by having fruit thrown at him. In response, he retaliated with brutality, resulting in the deaths of several hundred Jews and igniting a six-year civil war.

One of Alexander Jannaeus's most significant claims to fame—or infamy—was his self appointment to the dual role of king and high priest. This action was a bold assertion of his authority and a direct challenge to traditional

Jewish expectations. The Old Testament prophecies anticipated that only the Messiah would hold both offices. Jannaeus's ambition led him to believe he was this prophesied Messiah. His belief in his messianic role was reflected in the coinage he issued.

The prutah coins minted by Alexander Jannaeus feature two distinct designs on their obverse and reverse. On the obverse, the coins bear an anchor-like image with the Greek inscription Alexander the King, while the reverse displays Hebrew script. This dual-language design is noteworthy for several reasons. The Greek inscriptions represent the Hellenistic influence of the period, symbolizing Jannaeus's connection to the broader Greco-Roman world. In contrast, the Hebrew inscriptions tie the coins to the Jewish tradition and scriptural prophecy.

The coin, therefore, serves as an inadvertent advertisement for the coming Messiah, suggesting a deeper, providential orchestration behind Jannaeus's actions.

Many believe that Christ's life was concealed prophetically in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament and revealed in the Greek language of the New Testament Bible.

The reverse of the prutah coin features an eight-rayed star. This symbol, intended by Jannaeus to affirm his own messianic claim, is strikingly prophetic when considered in the context of the New Testament. The star of Bethlehem, mentioned in Matthew 2:1-2, heralded the birth of Jesus Christ, the true Messiah. While Jannaeus used the eight-rayed star to signify his perceived fulfillment of the Numbers 24:17 prophecy "A star will come out of Jacob," this same



Images courtesy Classical Numismatic Group



"The Widow's Mite" by Brazilian artist Joao Zeferino da Costa (1840-1915)

symbol would later come to represent the divine announcement of Christ's birth. The coin, therefore, serves as an inadvertent advertisement for the coming Messiah, suggesting a deeper, providential orchestration behind Jannaeus's actions.

Christ's birth and the messianic symbolism on the prutah coin highlight how God's plans can be woven into the fabric of history in ways that transcend human understanding. While Jannaeus was convinced of his own messianic role, the true Messiah was to be revealed through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This divine irony underscores a profound theological point: God can use

even the flawed and prideful actions of historical figures to fulfill His purposes.

In the final days leading up to His crucifixion, Jesus taught a lesson on sacrificial giving that is profoundly linked to the symbolic meaning of the prutah "widow's mite" coin. In Luke 21:1-4, Jesus observed a poor widow who, despite her poverty, gave all she had to live on—just a few coins. This act of total sacrifice became a powerful demonstration of true devotion and generosity. Just days later, Jesus Himself would embody this teaching through His own sacrifice, giving His life for the salvation of humanity. The widow's offering and Christ's impending sacrifice are interconnected, both representing a profound act of giving all that one has.

In light of the prutah coin's symbolic significance and Christ's teaching on sacrificial giving, one might reflect on the remarkable convergence of historical and divine elements. Could it be that Alexander Jannaeus, in his quest for personal glory and messianic affirmation, unwittingly minted a coin that heralded the true Messiah's arrival? Just as the widow gave all she had, "two small copper prutah," did Christ, who would soon sacrifice Himself, recognize the deep significance of her offering—an offering that mirrored the ultimate sacrifice He was about to make?

These questions serve as an appetizer for numismatists hungry to dig into the rich history told through ancient coins from the bible.

