

FALSE SHEKELS

by Peter E. Lewis



The Western Wall (Wailing Wall) in Jerusalem. (Wikimedia Commons)

RECENTLY a friend who knows that I am religious gave me a medal that he thought might be of interest. He did not know what it was but he thought it had something to do with religion. (Figure 1) With a little research I was able to discover that it was a false shekel, also known as a shekel medal or token. I found the story of these medals to be quite fascinating although rather complicated. Also it can be confusing because these medals play a role in the history of Judaism (the Jewish religion) and in the history of Christianity. Therefore I will try to explain the story in simple terms starting at the beginning.

You will need to know something about the Jewish festival called Passover, which is celebrated by the Jews every year. It commemorates a time, probably

in the 13th century BC, when the Jews escaped from slavery in Egypt and made their way to the land which is about where the modern state of Israel is today. God told the Jews that if they put the blood of a lamb on the sides and tops of the door-frames of their houses (Figure 2) they would not be affected by a plague that would kill the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. He would “pass over” them. (Figure 3) When this happened the pharaoh told the Jews to leave, which they did in a hurry. The story of the Passover is in Chapter 12 of the book of Exodus in the Bible. In Chapter 13, however, the Jews are told that although the firstborn sons of the Egyptians were killed, the firstborn sons of the Jews belong to God. If they did not want them to serve in the temple in Jerusalem

they would have to redeem them. This meant that they must give something to God in return for each firstborn son, then and in the future. In Hebrew “Redeem the son” is PIDYON HABEN.

In the Pidyon Haben ceremony the father gives to a cohen (a Jewish man who is descended from the first priest, Aaron) the equivalent of five silver shekels for his firstborn son. This amount of money is stipulated in the book of Numbers: *When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption*



Figure 1 – My false shekel. It is white metal, 35 mms in diameter and weighs 18.53 grams. Below the vessel on the obverse is SPENCER LONDON.



Figure 2 – In ancient Egypt a father puts the blood of a lamb above his door. (Wikimedia Commons: from the book, “With the children on Sundays,” 1911)



Figure 3 – The Angel of the Lord sees the blood on the doorframe.

(Wikimedia Commons: from the book, "Bible pictures and what they teach us", by Charles Foster, 1897)

price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. (Numbers 18:16) Thirty days after the birth of Jesus he was taken by his parents, Joseph and Mary, to the temple in Jerusalem and pres-

ented to a priest called Simeon. (Figure 4) This episode is recorded in Luke's gospel (Luke 2:22-40). Luke wrote that Joseph and Mary offered a pair of doves or two young pigeons (for the purification of a woman after childbirth, accord-

ing to Leviticus 12:8), but he does not mention the payment of five shekels. If they did not pay the money, they must have offered Jesus to the service of God. If they did pay the money, then Joseph and Mary bought Jesus from God and



Figure 4 – "Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple" by Hans Holbein the Elder, 1465-1524. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 5 – Tetradrachm of Tyre minted in 92/91 BC. (Triton XIX, Lot 297)



Figure 6 – Shekel minted during the Jewish Revolt from 66 to 70 AD. The date above the omer vessel is Year 5. (Gemini Auction III, Lot 248)

he did not belong to God. The fact that Luke wrote that Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law (Luke 2:39) suggests the latter.

What were the shekels that might have been given to Simeon? To answer this we will have to know something about the ancient economy of the Middle East. Before the invention of coinage in the 7th century BC people weighed out lumps of silver to buy things. In about 1500 BC Abraham bought a field for “four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.” (Genesis 23:16b) So originally a shekel was a weight that varied

from time to time, but it was about 14 grams. The word “shekel” was a word in the Semitic language which was the language used in Canaan, the land bordering the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. This region included Judaea, the homeland of the Jews. When coins started to circulate in the region it was part of the Persian Empire and the coin that took the place of the shekel weight was a silver coin that was in Greek called a siglos. The Greek name “siglos” was derived from the Semitic “shekel”. After Alexander the Great

conquered the Persian Empire in the 4th century BC the names used for coins were derived from the Greek language, and the common Greek coin was a drachma. When cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire began to mint coins, the names of the coins were multiples of the drachma. For example, the coins minted at Tyre from 126 BC were didrachms and tetradrachms. (Figure 5)

Tyre was an important commercial centre for the whole region and its coins were used by the Jews in the 1st century AD. Not only did the Jews need these silver coins for the Pidyon Haben but they needed them to pay for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. In the book of Exodus this temple tax was stipulated to be half a shekel annually. (Exodus 30:13) Fortunately we know what half a shekel was in the 1st century because in his gospel Matthew tells us that the temple tax was a didrachm (Matthew 17:24). A Tyrian didrachm weighed 7 grams and looked the same as a tetradrachm, which weighed 14 grams. Therefore if Joseph and Mary bought Jesus from God they would have paid five Tyrian tetradrachms.

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD at the end of the Jewish Revolt which began



Figure 7 – False shekel, German, 16th century, cast brass, 30 mms diameter. There is a smoking censer on the obverse and an almond bush on the reverse. (Image courtesy of Chen Eliyahu)



Figure 8 – False shekel, 18th century, silver, 29 mms diameter. There is a smoking censer on the obverse and an almond bush on the reverse. Part of the loop remains at the top. False shekels were often worn as badges by pilgrims. (Image courtesy of Chen Eliyahu)



Figure 9 – False shekel, 18th century. There is a smoking censer on the obverse and an almond bush on the reverse. (Image courtesy of Chen Eliyahu)

in 66 AD. During the revolt the Jews issued their own silver coins and they called them shekels. (Figure 6) The half-size coins were called half shekels. On the obverse there is an object that looks like a chalice, but the beaded border would make it difficult to drink from and some scholars think it is the omer vessel, used for offering grain in the temple. Above the omer vessel are Hebrew letters indicating the year of the revolt, from 1 to 5. The surrounding inscription on the shekel is in an old Hebrew script and it means "shekel of Israel." On the reverse there is a branch

with three pomegranates on it. Some scholars think it represents the high-priest's staff (with metal pomegranates on the top). The surrounding inscription means "Jerusalem the holy".

After the fall of the Roman Empire in about 500 AD Europe entered the Medieval Period. It is also known as the Dark Ages because civilization regressed and the people in general were ignorant. But the Jews clung to their traditions, and although they were no longer required to pay the temple tax they still had to pay the five shekels for the Pidyon Haben. The times were diffi-

cult and communications had deteriorated. What were they to do?

In the late Middle Ages some people came up with a solution. They would make copies of an ancient shekel which could be used for the Pidyon Haben. The shekel that they chose to copy was the shekel of the Jewish Revolt (66-70 AD), but they did not know that it was from that time. It seems they thought it was from the time of the Maccabean revolt which began in 166 BC and which resulted in Judaea being an independent nation until Roman rule came in 6 AD. They believed that the coin had been issued by Simon Maccabeus when he was in power from 142 to 135 BC. Frederic Madden in his book, *History of Jewish Coinage*, which was published in 1854, stated that Simon Maccabeus was the first to strike coins in Judaea, and the coins of Simon Maccabeus shown in the book have a chalice on the obverse and three buds on the reverse. Barclay Head in the 2nd edition of his *Historia Numorum*, published in 1910, agreed with Madden that these coins were issued by Simon Maccabeus. Subsequently archaeologists have demonstrated that these coins were struck during the Jewish Revolt from 66 to 70 AD, and scholars now believe that Simon Maccabeus did not issue coins.

To complicate matters the people making the shekel copies misinterpreted



Figure 10 – Didrachm of Rhodes, c. 250-230 BC. Obverse: the sun-god, Helios. Reverse: a rose. Rhodon in Greek means "rose." The woman in the left field is the goddess Athena, not the "beloved" in the Song of Songs. (Leu Numismatics AG, Auction 91, Lot 172)



Figure 11 – False shekel, silver, 16th century, from Goerlitz. There is a smoking censer on the obverse and an almond bush on the reverse.



Figure 12 – False shekel, brass, probably made between 1890 and 1920. There is a smoking censer on the obverse, and an olive branch on the reverse.



Figure 13 – False shekel made in America in about 1857. On the reverse the Hebrew inscription starts at 5 o'clock and is read anti-clockwise. Hebrew is read from right to left.

the images on the shekels. They thought the year number above the chalice was the smoke rising from an incense burner and they thought the branch on the reverse was the rod of Aaron that had miraculously branched and blossomed as recorded in the book of Numbers: "Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds." (Numbers 17:8) The inscriptions put on these false shekels or censer pieces were the same as on the original coins but they were in a more modern type of Hebrew script.

Chen Eliyahu (of Eliyahu's Judaica) lives at Rehovot in Israel and he has kindly given me permission to show three of his false shekels. He considers the oldest (Figure 7) to be German and from the 16th century, and the others (Figures 8 and 9) from the 18th century. Mine (Figure 1) is probably from the late 19th century. There are no pomegranates on the reverse of these coins because Aaron's staff was made of wood from an almond tree.

So far we have been looking at these coins through Jewish eyes. Christians saw them differently. During the Middle Ages the Christians in Europe were intensely religious and many of them made the dangerous pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They continued to do this during the Crusades and for centuries afterwards, and they often returned with a souvenir from the Holy Land. What could be a better souvenir than an example of one of the thirty pieces of silver that were paid to Judas Iscariot for betraying Jesus?

Today scholars consider that the thirty pieces of silver were probably tetradrachms of Tyre, but the makers of the souvenirs did not know this and they sold the false shekels (with a censer on the obverse and Aaron's rod on the reverse) to the pilgrims as "Judas coins". Another coin that was believed to be the Judas coin was a silver coin of Rhodes with the radiate head of Helios on one side and a rose on the other (Figure 10), and copies were sold to pilgrims. They were told that the thirty pieces of silver had miraculously changed to show the face of Christ wearing the crown of thorns, and the rose was the biblical rose of Sharon. In the *Song of Songs* the "beloved" says, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley." (2:1)

On the website of the American Israel Numismatic Association there is a detailed article about false shekels by Marvin Tameanko. It is entitled "False Shekels", *the Medals that influenced Modern History*. Much of the information in this article comes from his article. In it he says that most historians "connect the earliest pieces with George



Figure 14 – 50-prutah coin issued by Israel in 1949. It bears the same design as the coin in Figure 6.



Figure 15 – 10-lira coin issued by Israel in 1970, 1971 and 1972. On the bottom of the reverse the three Hebrew words, read from the right, mean "coin redeem the son," that is, it is a Pidyon Haben coin. The Hebrew in the centre means "Redeem every first-born son."



Figure 16 – 10-lira coin issued by Israel in 1973 and 1974. The Hebrew words are the same as on the coin in Figure 15.

Emerich, 1422-1507, the burgomeister (mayor) of the city of Goerlitz, in Prussia. It was believed that he fabricated the first censer tokens after his return from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1465 and sold them as souvenirs at a reproduction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre he built in Goerlitz in 1480." In 1940 Bruno Kisch wrote an article entitled *Shekel Medals and False Shekels* in which he catalogued 81 specimens from various countries, but did not include pieces produced in England. As my false shekel has SPENCER LONDON on it Marvin Tameanko suggested that it might have

been made for use in Masonic rituals because there was a London firm, *Toye, Kenning and Spencer*, which made Masonic jewellery and ritual implements at the end of the 19th century.

After being given a false shekel by my friend I bought three more on eBay. The first (Figure 11) is silver with an old patina and the dealer said it was made at Goerlitz in the 16th century. The second (Figure 12) is unusual because the branch seems to be bearing olives, not almonds. Perhaps the engraver was not Jewish and did not know the Hebrew Scriptures. The third (Figure



Figure 17 – 25-lira coin issued by Israel in 1976. A similar coin issued in 1977 is smaller but has a higher percentage of silver. The Hebrew on the reverse means, “With the redemption money, shalt thou redeem them.” It is the beginning of Numbers 18:16.

13) has a particular feature: the Hebrew inscription starts at 5 o'clock as on the original revolt shekel, not at 11 o'clock as on all the other false shekels. This suggests that the engraver was aware of the inscription on the original revolt shekel. According to Tameanko this engraver, Mr A. Nicholas, was in America and his false shekels were used as illustrations of biblical coins by Sunday schools. He said that in 1857 the New York Herald published an advertisement for the sale of such a “Sunday School” shekel which was labelled a “facsimile of the shekel of the sanctuary.”

When the state of Israel was created in 1948 the first coins that were issued reproduced the designs on ancient coins. The 50-prutah coin has three pomegranates on the obverse and is 50% silver. (Figure 14) It could have been used for the Pidyon Haben but it was not placed in circulation. In 1970 Israel began to issue specific Pidyon Haben

coins (Figures 15, 16 and 17). Also dealers sold sets of five Pidyon Haben coins with the certificate to be signed by the cohen. (Figure 18)

Should the Pidyon Haben be revived for Christians? You could argue that Jesus was circumcised, redeemed and baptized, and the first Christians would certainly have redeemed their firstborn sons. Although the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD Christians could pay the Pidyon Haben coins to an ordained member of the church. However, Paul of Tarsus argued that Christians do not have to follow the Jewish Law in that way. It seems that he did not object to such cultural practices as circumcision, but he denied that they were necessary for a person to be acceptable to God. Anyway, it is amazing what information can be derived from a coin, and I am grateful to my friend for giving me my first false shekel.

☆☆☆



Figure 18 – Set of five Pidyon Haben coins with the certificate. (Image courtesy of Menachem Coins).

MAKE YOUR FIRST CALL TO THESE SUPPORTING ADVERTISERS (AND PLEASE TELL THEM... YOU “SAW IT IN CAB”)

Bexley Stamp & Coin Accs.....	22
Classy Collectables.....	21
Coin Trends.....	29
Coinworks.....	9
Downies.....	7
Drake Sterling Numismatics	22, 51
Edlins of Canberra & Yass	27
IAG.....	4
IBNS Convention Perth.....	31
japaneseinvasionmoney.com	22
Klaus Ford	38-39
Fred Lever	26
Liz’s List.....	51
M.E.F. Books	
Moss	
Noble Numismatics.....	2
Padstow Coin Centre.....	51
Phoenix Auctions WA.....	15
Renniks Publications	76
Romanorum	58
Royal Australian Mint.....	3
Roxburys Auction House	75
SCDAA Petersham Fair	50
Status International Auctions	23
Sterling and Currency.....	21, 37
Mick Vort-Ronald.....	6
vpcoins.....	58
Walter Eigner Pty Ltd.....	19
Steele Waterman	67
Trevor Wilkin	74
Ye Olde Coin Company.....	33

TO BE UPDATED