

## COINS AND THE BIBLE – Monday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2013

The talk was given by Richard Abdy of The British Museum. He illustrated his talk with slides and concentrated on Ancient Rome as a theme in relation to the Bible stories and events in Jesus's lifetime. Three main areas were highlighted in his talk. Firstly, coins mentioned in the Bible, particularly the New Testament. Secondly, the individuals at the time and politicians and, thirdly, developing influence of the Bible and Christian Art.

From 300-27 B.C. coinage was being introduced by the Roman Republic very much influenced by the Cultural significance from Greece. A definition of coinage is a stamped metal disc issued by a Government for trade and valuation. There needed to be a form of coinage barter for the buying and selling of goods and services. Obviously, beyond 27 B.C. and into the A.D. years, Rome became a real money economy and certain coins had very high denominations. There were no notes.

Typical Roman coins were made of gold, silver, brass and copper. All valued in much the same way as our own money values according to size and weight. Coins consisted of the portraits of Emperors as they embodied state and policies and on the reverse, bore images referring to the City such as Temples, Gods worshipped by their inhabitants. Money was carried in purses and common coins were named e.g. Denarius and Sestertius to name but a few.

It was said that one needed a million Sestertii to become a member of the Roman Senate. A soldier's pay was 225 denarii p.a. paid to them three times a year given as a stipend.

The Old Testament reveals there were no coins prior to the Iron Age. Barter was often done by wheat and oil but reference was made to the silver shekel as a standard measurement. The talent was another weight very much associated in the Old Testament with gold and silver. However, there are many references to coinage and taxes in the New Testament. The denarius was the daily pay for Roman soldiers and the wage of a day labourer in Palestine (Matthew 20:21). It was the Tribute penny that was thought to have been shown to Jesus when he made his famous speech "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are Gods (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). He recognised that taxes had to be paid to carry out public works. It was observed that every male Jew was required to pay an annual head tax to the Temple Treasury.

Other Bible references of coinage refer to five sparrows sold for two assaria and even thirty pieces of silver were given to Judas as payment for betraying Jesus.

Mark 12:42 tells us that Jesus watched as a poor widow put a coin into the temple treasury. The coin only had a small worth, possibly two mites which makes a farthing but Jesus noted that he thought her contribution was greater in proportion than the other donations.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10 25-37) traveller rescues an injured man and gave an innkeeper two silver coins as a down payment on food, lodging and care for the person he has helped.

The Bible also has Paul's observation "that the love of money is the root of all evil".

Coinage then, like now, relied on artwork on coins showing a face with inscriptions; there were heads of eagles, designs indicating events. Coins eventually influenced the development of Christian images and symbols e.g. Constantinian crosses. The face of Jesus on Byzantine coins eventually appeared, a topic always difficult showing him in different guises and, on one coin, holding the Bible.

The lecture ended with the showing of some manuscript writings i.e. Codex Sinaiticus indicating sacred words and symbols as well as showing Christian artwork in the form of mosaics and ivory panels.