

# Tribute Penny: Lewis ANS Article Review/Deconstruction.

The purpose of this note is to address several matters raised in an article published on the website of the ANS (**The Australian Numismatic Society**); "The Denarius in Mark 12:15", by Peter Lewis, at the following URL:  
<http://the-ans.com/library/2012PeterLewis.html>.

The author, Peter Lewis, frequently uses terms such as "presumably", "probably", "might", "could", "suggests", "possible", "assume", as well as "self-evident" and "strong tradition" as if each and every one of these terms were interchangeable with the copular verbs "is" or "was", typically as a matter of fact. Unfortunately this is rarely true, and the opposite is more often the case. These tenuous and fragile threads are then woven together into a gossamer thin veil that fails to withstand the slightest intrusion of a mere inquisitory gaze, let alone any detailed examination. His assertions and notions fail to be supported by proper and testable evidence at almost every stage.

In arguing against the Tiberius denarius Lewis claims that "*the crowd would not have known what names or titles were on the coin*", simply because they were written in Latin. The names and titles on this coin were written in Latin, however he offers no evidence as to why the crowd "*would not have known*" any of this. Even though Greek was the lingua franca, much as he states, there are many letters that are in common with Latin and it would not have been any great stretch to expect that at least some people would have been able to ascertain what was written by way of deduction. The literacy levels of the populace at this time may not be fully known, but Lewis offers nothing in evidence either way, only assumptions.

There are no extra-Biblical sources for any of these matters, but even so, Lewis stretches credulity by making claims that are also non-Biblical. He claims in paragraph 5 that Jesus "*would not be touching the coin or even looking at it.*" How does he know? This is not stated, in fact the Biblical account directly contradicts this with Jesus saying "show me a denarius". In the same paragraph he claims that Jesus would have been "*reluctant to handle the Tyrian coins*", whilst in the previous paragraph he explains that "*these pagan images did not prevent the Jewish priests accepting the Tyrian coins as tax*". Lewis has to explain whether Jews could touch or look at these coins or not (especially in this context).

Further, in paragraph 12, and in response to the question along the lines of "*Whose likeness and inscription...*" (and its recorded variants), he makes the extraordinary claim that "*the correct answer would have been, 'Livia and Caesar.'*" There is no possible way for anyone to know this, and the suggestion borders on the absurd. No part of Lewis' claim is recorded anywhere in any ancient source, and even today there remains some (very limited) debate as to whether the seated figure - which is clearly not a portrait - on the reverse is Livia (which is generally considered most likely), Livia as Pax (next most likely, slightly less than the former), or simply Pax (least likely). In any case, no one at any stage asks who is shown on the reverse of the coin, only whose image or portrait, and the answer given in each of the individual writings is unanimously "Caesar's".

In paragraph 8 he claims that "*'Quadrans' is the name of a bronze coin that circulated only in Italy.*" Lewis offers no evidence for this claim, whereas in fact the quadrans could have

circulated well beyond the Italian borders, into Spain, Gaul, Asia Minor, and perhaps also North Africa and the Middle Eastern areas. However, it did not need to circulate, only the meaning of the word and the concept of it as a denomination need be known to the reader. Provided the reader was familiar with what a ‘Quadrans’ was, and the value it represented, then the use of the word in Mark remains valid. It does not prove, as Lewis asserts, that he was adapting the story for the expected audience as was done for the KJV (King James Version).

Another flawed argument involves Lewis’ proposal of the Tiberian Antiochene tetradrachm (RPC 4161) as the alternative ‘Tribute Penny’. First of all, if Jesus could not, as Lewis claims without reference, touch or look at a coin with one head, then how is it that he would instead look at or touch a coin with *two* heads? Either he could, or he could not. To reject the Tiberius denarius for this reason equally condemns the Antiochene tetradrachm.

In proposing a tetradrachm from an eastern mint, and then specifying the only possibility as being one particular and extremely rare issue from Antioch alone Lewis seems to ignore the fact that it was just one of several silver tetradrachms that were struck in and around that region. Those other eastern silver tetradrachms may be summarised here (abbreviated): Syria, **Antioch**: RPC 4108 Augustus/Zeus; RPC 4109-10 Tiberius/Zeus; RPC 4150 Augustus/Zeus; RPC 4151-60 Augustus/ Tyche seated; Syria, **Seleukeia**: RPC 4328-9 Augustus/Fulmen (thunderbolt); Syria, **Laodikeia**: RPC 4381(-2) Augustus/Bust of Tyche. Why not any of these others, each of which concords with most or all of Lewis’ apparent criteria? [Note: Two additional eastern tetradrachms (Syria, **Tarsus**: RPC 4005 Tiberius/Livia as Hera seated; and Syria, **Antioch**: RPC 4162 Tiberius/Tyche seated) are both dated to shortly after the commonly accepted dates of the events in question].

He then tries to explain away the extreme rarity of his own proposed candidate with the extraordinary and wholly unsubstantiated claim that the coin was withdrawn from circulation “with the enthusiastic assistance of the Jews” by a Roman emperor who was on one hand the all-powerful and supreme ruler of the western world, and on the other apparently scared to “antagonize (sic) the wealthy Jews of Antioch”. Again, he offers no evidence at all of such highly implausible matters. Not only that, but he again contradicts himself in paragraph 19 by claiming that these Antiochene coins (and those of other cities in the north) “did not circulate in the southern Jewish areas”.

In spite of the specific use of the term ‘denarius’ (δηνάριον) in Mark, and in the title of his own article, Lewis rejects this outright, claiming that it was a term only used because Mark was written for a Roman audience, and this was a term for a coin that was familiar to that audience. He likens this to the KJV use of the word “penny”, a coin and denomination familiar to the 16th century audience of that time and place. What he does not explain with any sufficiency is the use in context of the exact same term by both Matthew and Luke, written for Jewish and Greek audiences respectively (the word also appears in John).

He also claims that the Tiberius denarius did not circulate in this part of the world (paragraph 13), or at least that they are not found in an archaeological context that dates to the period in question. Whilst this seems to be initially supported by the authors of RPC (p.12), further reading of that tome indicates that there is equally no evidence to establish that Roman coins did not circulate in those areas (p.585f).

There has been, in fact, at least one Tiberian denarius that has been found in an archaeological context, in Jerusalem. It was discovered in the excavations carried out at the Southern Wall, in the late 1960’s. There was also an Augustan denarius found in the same

general area, and an Aureus of Tiberius as well. There is also significant anecdotal evidence from local coin-dealers and collectors in Jerusalem and Israel that many of these types of coins have been found in this area, although not necessarily in an archaeological context.

Lewis fails to recognise the many contradictions in his own arguments; eg: in paragraph 12 he states of the denarii that were struck in Lugdunum, that “*it seems very inefficient of the Roman authorities to be using these coins when facilities for minting silver coins existed at several cities in the Middle East*”, arguing against the probability that Roman coins from this mint would be found in the East. A few lines later, in paragraph 15, he states that “*160 early Imperial denarii struck at the mint of Lugdunum*” were in fact found there (ie: at Mt. Carmel).

In paragraph 16 he makes the remarkable “*finding*” that “*Augustan and Tiberian denarii did not circulate in the province of Syria*” and that the province was a “*closed currency area at the time*”. He goes on to claim that “*Presumably the foreign currency was then melted down and minted into the local currency*”, all without any evidence to support any of these claims. He himself brings up the above noted discovery of at least one such coin, a Tiberius denarius (the one generally accepted to be the ‘Tribute Penny’) in the excavations of the southern walls of Jerusalem.

Additionally, the Qumran hoard included several Roman Republican coins, all of them from before the purported time of Jesus. The Mt. Carmel hoard was buried around 67 CE and it also contained a large number of Roman denarii, all of the emperor Augustus, with Caius and Lucius Caesars on the reverse. Both of these hoards are noted by Lewis (paragraph 15), again seemingly in contradiction to his own above statements.

Since there are hoards containing Roman coins, and specifically Roman denarii from before the time of the figure of Jesus, and hoards with Roman denarii from shortly after the time of Jesus, then he must explain, with supporting evidence, why he has chosen to assert that no such coins could have circulated - as he claims - during that relatively brief period in between.

In some parts Lewis asks readers to simply accept the Biblical version put forward without question or additional examination (eg: paragraph 32 “*There is little doubt that Jesus actually spoke the words . . .*”), but in other sections he demands that parts of those same writings be reinterpreted toward some other meaning of his personal choosing (eg: paragraphs 8-9, where Lewis claims that the passage should be reinterpreted because Mark was writing for a Roman audience, as well as paragraphs 17, 23 and 33, among others), and mostly on his unsubstantiated say-so.

However, Lewis also quotes Papias (paragraph 38, without the relevant additional reference to John the Elder) which asserts that Mark was correct and that he “*wrote down accurately all that he remembered*”, that “*Mark made no mistake in thus recording some things just as he remembered them*” and that he made “*no false statement therein*”. In quoting Papias, is Lewis asking us to accept that Mark is in fact correct and the tale is to be interpreted precisely as told, or he is telling us (as he does above) that Mark is not correct and therefore open to reinterpretation, and the words of Papias and John the Elder must consequently also be dismissed. It simply cannot be both.

A lot can be assessed by the quality and relevance of the footnotes and bibliography. There are 38 footnotes, detailing about thirty different reference works. Very few of these are of numismatic subjects, most are biblically related and scarcely address anything to do with the central question at all. Of those that are numismatic several are general works, but only two deal

with any matter related directly to the subject (*disclosure: one of these is an article I co-authored with Rev. Peter Dunstan (2006)*). Three are of Lewis' own earlier, similarly flawed works.

There are also far too many seemingly off-topic digressions and other departures from the subject, as well as many other apparent irrelevancies that add little or nothing to the subject matter specifically, nor to any of the numismatic or historical arguments. Some of the claims encountered may properly be characterised as various combinations of fantasy, fabrication and conjecture.

Overall, Lewis' general presentation takes the following forms: *I suggest this...*, *I think that...*, *I believe this...*, *I assert that...*, *I presume the other...*, *one should assume that...*; concluding with something to the effect of: *Okay, now that I have proven my thesis ...!* However, these assumptions and suggestions do not add up to any form of tangible or reliable evidence. The necessary distance from assertion via substantiation to proof has been narrowed so as to be almost non-existent, or perhaps disregarded or dismissed completely.

It is perhaps his last paragraph that reveals the true nature of his writing, wherein he states: *"The argument presented in this paper . . . is, of course, only a hypothesis. It involves a large degree of speculation."* This is perhaps the most accurate and restrained statement in this article.

He then makes this entirely false statement: *"However, as in scientific studies, theories should be put forward and considered by the relevant scholars until they are **proven to be untenable**."* [my emphasis]. This shows an acutely flawed understanding of the scientific method (and also terminology). Firstly, 'theories' are not put forward, 'hypotheses' are. A "theory" is the graduation point, where it becomes accepted after vigorous peer-review, testing and expert examination.

Also, hypotheses are not accepted until they are "*proven to be untenable*". Quite the opposite, they are not accepted, sometimes at all, or except perhaps in the most general and simple of terms, until they have been proven, suitably acknowledged or otherwise established and recognised by expert scholars in the particular field (ie: peer-review).

The **burden of proof** rests solely with the one making the assertion or other type of positive claim. It is most definitely not the task of the reader to subsequently "disprove" a manifestly flawed hypothesis. A matter may, however, be taken up for consideration by scholars and others, but that is by no means to be viewed as any form of acceptance, and certainly not as proof, no matter how many people may choose to do so.

There may ultimately be a level of agreement in some circles with parts of his proposition, but based on this article in its current form this can only be done without good and proper reason. The fact remains that there is, frankly, either no evidence, or no sufficiently persuasive and verifiable evidence presented within his article that supports almost any of the claims therein.

It is a great disappointment that as respected an institution as the ANS has chosen to publish or at least reproduce his article, even though only on their website. In doing so they have, perhaps inadvertently, given it an inappropriate air of approval and with it a level of authority and credibility to which it simply fails to rise.