

Two Ancient Coins and the King of Kings

by Paul G. Humber

A recent revelation surrounding a first-century ossuary with the Aramaic inscription (when translated), “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus,” is remarkable, but other artifacts similarly spur imagination. The author inherited two first century coins that do just that.



Parthians Heard Peter!



The first is a silver, Parthian coin that could have been hand-held by Christians who had witnessed and heard the Apostle Peter preach on Pentecost. As Acts 2:5-9 reveals, Parthians were present: “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? **Parthians**, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,

Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

It can serve as a small bond-of-attachment with Christians of almost two thousand years ago. Here is a tangible connection with them. The coin itself, featuring Parthian ruler Gotarzes II, was minted between 40-51 AD, a mere decade or so following the Peter’s preaching in Jerusalem. Parthian believers present, therefore, could easily have returned to their homeland and have handled this particular coin during its years of commerce and usage.

On the reverse side of this coin, the Greek words, **ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ βασιλεως βασιλεων** are inscribed. Look above the sitting archer. This is the biblical phrase, King of Kings, given to Nebuchadnezzar (think of Babylon and modern Iraq, both relatively close to the region of ancient Parthia: “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. You, O king, are **the king of kings**. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold” (Dan 2:36-38).



The phrase was also given to Artaxerxes (think of Persia and modern day Iran--roughly equivalent to ancient Parthia): “Artaxerxes, **king of kings**, To Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven: Greetings” (Ezra 7:12).

The coin, thus, gives extra-biblical confirmation, with geographical appropriateness, of a phrase used in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ is referred to as the King of Kings, but the next coin relates to that.

At the Feet of Jesus?

More crude when compared to the silver one above is the hard-to-discern prow of a galley on the one side. Three important letters, however, are on the reverse side: E ~~theta~~ **Error! Switch argument not specified.**N. The third letter is clearly the Greek letter, *nu*. The middle is less distinct, the left side seemingly missing, but the middle (horizontal) line for the theta is present. The first letter looks more like an omicron than an epsilon, but authorities have confirmed that this is a common



variant. According to Guy T. Clark, “Judean coins from this period are nearly all crude and often have mistakes.” He reported that he talked with David Hendin, adding, “All confirm that this is a known variant.” It is an abbreviation for *εθναρχης* which may be translated as Ethnarch and refers to Archelaus, a son of King Herod, also mentioned in the Bible, “But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee...” (Matthew.2:22).

The coin pictured was minted during Archelaus' Judean rule, from 4 BC to 6 AD. Notice that the word, King, does **not** appear on the coin. King Herod **wanted** Archelaus to be the next king, but Caesar Augustus did not ratify Herod's codicil that Archelaus should be the next king. Students of the Bible are aware that biblical tension surrounded just who would be the new king?

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (Matt 2:1-3).

Some years later, the Lord Jesus Christ is hailed as “the King:”

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Lk.19:37-38).

The coin pictured relates to the Mount of Olives. "F. Barakat" of *Barakat Antiquities & Art Gallery*, guaranteed that the coin is a "Bronze Coin of Herod Archelaus 4 B.C. - 6 C.E. Found on Mount of Olives." Since the coin was minted thirty years before Jesus spoke, it may well have been present (on or in the ground), near the feet of Jesus and those who were calling Him "King." The Gospel writer continued:

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" Jesus' responded: "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:39-40).

This very coin, looking much like a flat pebble, was very possibly right there on that Mount when Jesus spoke these words. The silent testimony of the coin, hardly distinguishable from a flat pebble, is that Herod's son was only an **EθError! Switch argument not specified.N**. By way of contrast, the audible testimony of the people present on this Palm

Sunday was that Jesus Himself was and is "**the King** who comes in the name of the Lord!" A few days later, even "Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Jn.19:19). The Apostle John, who reported this of Pilate, also wrote of the Lord Jesus:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: **KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS** (Rev.19:11-16).

In summary, Gotarzes II, represented by the icon on the face of the first coin, has been dead for long centuries, and Ethnarch Archelaus has been dead for about the same period. Handel's *Messiah* affirms today, however, that the One who received the inscription of royalty from Pilate and the adulation of royalty from Judean residents on Palm Sunday, is indeed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. An ossuary, very possibly belonging to Jesus' brother, James, and once containing James' bones, may have been identified, but the tomb of "King" Jesus, according to the testimony of history, has been empty for centuries.

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