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# “Pay to Caesar the Things of Caesar, and to God the Things of God”: A Narrative Reading of the Denarius in the Gospel of Mark (12:13-17)

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## ABSTRACT

*Moving away from traditional historical-critical methods of interpretation, the following research paper examines the “Question about Paying Taxes” episode of the Gospel According to Mark (12:13-17) from a narrative-critical perspective. More specifically, the focus is on the role and function of the denarius that Jesus requests from his adversaries. Some of the important questions addressed are: why is the coin included in this story and what is the symbolic function of the denarius? The paper demonstrates that the coin is not a necessary part of the literary flow of the narrative and therefore, argues that its function within the pericope serves as the turning point in the story where the initial situation is reversed in Jesus’ favor. The prop is read as a literary device which functions as a figurative image of the materiality of the Roman Empire. The denarius and its representation of materiality help to contrast the payment of things to Caesar with the immaterial things to be paid to God.*

Key Words: Caesar, coin, denarius, God, Gospel of Mark, Jesus, narrative criticism.

## INTRODUCTION

The following essay explores the “Question about Paying Taxes” episode recounted in the Gospel of Mark (12:13-17). More specifically, the concern of this research paper is on the denarius and how it functions in the episode. Some of the important questions addressed throughout the course of this paper are: Why is the coin included in this story? Is the presence of the object necessary? What is the symbolic function of the denarius? While most of the studies on this artifact have focused on its historical background, this article uses a narrative lens to gain a more rounded understanding of why the coin is mentioned and how it operates within the episode. The argument is made that the denarius can be read and understood as a narrative device that helps the protagonist, Jesus, skillfully undermine his rivals. The placement of the denarius in the text allows Jesus the opportunity to respond to a trick question

with a question of his own, while simultaneously functioning as a symbolic representation of material wealth and the empire.

The study begins by presenting a modern English translation of the text in question followed by a brief introduction to the narrative approach used in this essay. A few words are said concerning the various accounts of this episode in other gospels, including those in non-canonical books. This introductory material is preceded by a succinct overview of the historical understandings of the coin proposed in previous scholarship before presenting the narrative reading of the coin.

## I. GREEK TEXT & TRANSLATION

### *Mark 12:13-17*<sup>1</sup>

**13** Καὶ ἀποστέλλουσιν πρὸς αὐτόν τινὰς τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ τῶν Ἡρωδιανῶν ἵνα αὐτὸν ἀγρεύσωσιν λόγῳ. **14** καὶ ἐλθόντες λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· διδάσκαλε, οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀληθὴς εἶ καὶ οὐ μέλει σοι περὶ οὐδενός· οὐ γὰρ βλέπεις εἰς πρόσωπον ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλ' ἐπ' ἀληθείας τὴν ὁδὸν τοῦ θεοῦ διδάσκεις· ἔξεστιν δοῦναι κῆνσον Καίσαρι ἢ οὐ; δῶμεν ἢ μὴ δῶμεν; **15** ὁ δὲ εἰδὼς αὐτῶν τὴν ὑπόκρισιν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τί με πειράζετε; φέρετέ μοι δηνάριον ἵνα ἴδω. **16** οἱ δὲ ἤνεγκαν. καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· τίνος ἢ εἰκῶν αὕτη καὶ ἡ ἐπιγραφή; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν αὐτῷ· Καίσαρος. **17** ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τὰ Καίσαρος ἀπόδοτε Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ. καὶ ἐξεθαύμαζον ἐπ' αὐτῷ.

**13** And they sent to [Jesus] some Pharisees and Herodians so that they might trap him in his talk. **14** And having come they said to him, “Teacher, we have known that you are truthful and not concerned with anyone around you; for you do not look into the faces of men, but you teach the way of God in the presence of truth. Is it lawful to give taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we give or should we not?” **15** But having known their hypocrisy he said to them, “Why are you testing me? Bring to me a denarius so that I might see it.” **16** So they brought one. Then he said to them, “Whose image is this, and whose inscription?” They answered to

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek text is taken from: Institute for New Testament Textual Research. 2012. *Novum Testamentum Graece Nestle-Aland (NA 28)*. Hendrickson Pub. All English translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

him, "Caesar's." <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to them, "Pay to Caesar the things of Caesar, and to God the things of God." And they were amazed at him.

## II. APPROACH

The landscape of contemporary New Testament biblical studies is filled with a plethora of methodological approaches all of which have their strengths and weaknesses. For the analysis of the coin in Mark's gospel, I have chosen to analyze it using narrative criticism. This method is commonly utilized by contemporary biblical scholars and is explained by James L. Resseguie as follows:

Narrative Criticism focuses on how biblical literature works as *literature*. The 'what' of a text (its content) and the 'how' of a text (its rhetoric and structure) are analyzed as a complete tapestry, an organic whole. Narrative criticism is a shift away from traditional historical-critical methods to the way a text communicates meaning as a self-contained unit, a literary artifact, an individual whole. (18-19)

The strength of narrative criticism lies in its unique approach to biblical texts as literature. The method allows one to pose important questions about the text that have not usually been addressed by the traditional historical-critical methods. In my analysis of the passage, I employ narrative criticism and undertake this approach while acknowledging that historical understandings of the denarius are dire for an appreciation of its literary function within the story. The method allows for a reading of the coin that highlights its symbolic function within the text.

## III. THE EPISODE IN OTHER TEXTS

Though the following research paper examines only the episode as it is presented in the Gospel of Mark, there are several versions of the story about paying taxes to Caesar. Two of these versions are found in the synoptic tradition and two others appear in the extra-canonical *Gospel According to Thomas* and *Egerton Gospel*. The accounts of the synoptic gospels (Mark 12:13-17; Matthew 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26) are all very similar and differ only slightly from one another. Some of the notable differences are that in the Matthean version, the Pharisees plot against Jesus and send their disciples along with the Herodians to trap him. It is also interesting to note that both Matthew and Luke omit the part where Jesus requests to see the coin. In these

versions, Jesus simply asks for the coin with no mention of wanting to look at it.

The version of the episode found in Thomas (logion 100) is unique from those of the synoptic gospels in that the proposed resolution distinguishes between Caesar, God, and Jesus himself.<sup>2</sup> In the Thomasine account, a reader can assume that the ones showing Jesus a coin are his own disciples and not the Pharisees or the Herodians who wish to trap him. In addition, Thomas' version does not have anyone ask Jesus a question about whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes; rather, there is simply a statement about Caesar's demand for taxes to which Jesus responds. The protagonist's reply is enigmatic in distinguishing the disciples' offerings to himself with those that they must offer to God. In the Egerton Gospel version of this episode, we find something quite different than the text of Matthew, Mark, or Luke since it presents Jesus quoting from the *Book of Isaiah*.<sup>3</sup> Though the fragmented text of Egerton shares a connection with the Markan version (as an antecedent or precedent), it is, in some respects, very far removed from it.<sup>4</sup>

#### IV. HISTORICAL READINGS OF THE DENARIUS

In general, scholars have come to understand the denarius of the episode in relation to historical understandings of its usage throughout the Roman Empire. Many commentators have wondered whether or not Jesus had a coin on him, asserting that Jesus asks for the coin because he himself did not carry currency (Donahue and Harrington 2002, 345; France 2002, 466; Giblin 1971, 526; Witherington 1990, 102). Perhaps the most important issue surrounding the denarius concerns the image that would have been featured on it. Augustus and Tiberius are the only two Caesars who can be considered (based

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<sup>2</sup> The version of the episode found in Logion 100 of the *Gospel of Thomas* is as follows:

"They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, 'Caesar's men demand taxes from us.' He said to them, 'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, give to God the things that are God's, and give to me what is mine.'"

<sup>3</sup> The Egerton Gospel account is as follows (based on the translation by Tobias Nicklas):

"...to him and sent out to investigate, they tested him and said: 'Teacher Jesus, we know that you have come from God. For what you do bears witness beyond all the prophets. So tell us: Is it allowed to hand over to the kings what belongs to their government? Shall we pay them or not? But since Jesus knew their intention, he became angry and said to them: Why do you call me teacher with your mouth, but do not hear what I say! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you: this people honours me with their lips but their heart is far away from me—in vain do they worship me...' (Nicklas 2009, 77).

<sup>4</sup> In all three synoptic gospels, Jesus is brought a δηνάριον (Roman coin). This is not the case for the other two versions of the pericope. In the Thomasine version, Jesus is shown a ΝΟΥΒ (gold coin) and in the Egerton Gospel there is no mention made of a coin.

on a historically chronological rationale) to be the Caesar whose image was stamped on the coin, and some have suggested that the denarius probably featured Tiberius (Hart 1984, 243-244). There are, however, limitations for the historical recovery of the story:

It should however be remembered that no such 'identification', however probable, can ever be proved to be right, nor will it add anything to our understanding of the Gospel narrative. What the coin had to contribute as a 'visual aid' is all recorded there. Our question springs only from natural curiosity. (Hart 1984, 242-243)

Another important question, not just of the image on the denarius, has been the potential availability of the denarius during Jesus' lifetime. In a recent article, Deborah-Furlan Taylor brings to light the dispute among numismatists about whether or not the Roman denarius was present in Palestine at the outset of the Christian era (Taylor 2009, 582-583). The increasingly popular contention that the denarius did not circulate in Palestine before 70CE is informed by archaeological coin finds and the overall construction of the Roman flow of currency during the early Roman Empire (583). She maintains that:

None of the instances of the word 'denarius' in the NT provides evidence of the existence of the use of denarii in Palestine. Rather, they reflect various NT authors writing for an audience that used either the denarius or a variety of local coinages linked to the denarius. (585)

Despite the fact that the New Testament writings cannot be used as evidence to prove the use of denarii in Palestine, it can be acknowledged that archeological analyses may help shape our understanding of the historicity of such texts alluding to currency (such as the episode in question). Taylor wonders if another coin was used in place of the denarius and, if that were the case, what difference that would make (595).

Unfortunately, the problem with the canonical account cannot be solved simply by understanding "drachm" for "denarius." Mark's account requires a coin bearing imperial iconography that was *common in Palestine* during Jesus' lifetime... before the Romans reformed the coinage system in the 50s and 60s, neither the denarius nor the Antiochene drachm was readily available in Palestine. (Taylor 2009, 595)

According to the author, we cannot simply pretend that Mark meant to say denarius over something else. Whether or not the evidence proves that

denarii were circulating during that time period is important, but the story is not any less significant if it is conclusively proven that there were no denarii circulating during the time of Jesus.

While historical analyses of the denarius have not yielded consensus about the coin that was used or whether Jesus carried a denarius with him, it is nonetheless important for any interpretation of the passage to have an understanding of the historical facets surrounding the artifact. The narrative reading that is presented below interprets the denarius of Mark 12:13-17 as a literary device, a tool used by the author; however, the coin is not merely a narrative instrument. The denarius was a part of the Roman currency system and, like currency today, it featured important images related to the state. In the case of the episode, the image on the coin is of Caesar, the title of Roman emperors. Though the quest to find out which Caesar was featured on the coin may not be possible due to our lack of evidence and because denarii may not have been in circulation in Palestine during Jesus' life, it is still important to understand the historical context of the denarius so that one can better appreciate how the author Mark has employed this artifact in the telling of his story.

#### V. NARRATIVE READING OF THE DENARIUS

What the author of the Gospel of Mark presents in the "Question about Paying Taxes" episode is a dispute between the antagonist Pharisees/Herodians and the protagonist Jesus. The battle is not one of physical strength; rather, it is a war of words as the cunning Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus in his speech (12:13). This ploy backfires when Jesus turns the tables on them by requesting a coin and asking the inquisitors a question of his own. In a scene where the battle is verbal, what purpose is there for the coin to be present? More importantly, we may begin by asking whether or not the coin is necessary for Jesus to come out victorious in his engagement with the Pharisees and Herodians. This question is significant since it is helpful in determining the role and prominence of the denarius in the account. If the coin is necessary for the story to unfold, then our understanding of its place in the text will be different than if it was not needed, but still included. Does the coin help further the plot or is there a different motive for its inclusion? The best means of answering this question is to examine the story with and without the coin in order to see whether or not it is integral to the structure of the episode. The following is a table showcasing the

original episode on the left-hand side (*With the Denarius*) and the same episode with the coin removed on the right-hand side (*Without the Denarius*):

**Table I. Removing the Denarius from Mark 12:13-17**

<i>With the Denarius</i>	<i>Without the Denarius</i>
<p>13 Then they sent to him some Pharisees and Herodians in order to trap him in his words. 14 And having come they said to him, "Teacher, we have known that you are truthful and not concerned with anyone around you; for you do not look into the faces of men, but you teach the way of God in the presence of truth. Is it lawful to give taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we give or should we not?" 15 But having known their hypocrisy he said to them, "Why are you testing me? Bring to me a denarius so that I might see it." 16 So they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?" They answered to him, "Caesar's." 17 Jesus said to them, "Pay to Caesar the things of Caesar, and to God the things of God." And they were amazed at him.</p>	<p>13 Then they sent to him some Pharisees and Herodians in order to trap him in his words. 14 And having come they said to him, "Teacher, we have known that you are truthful and not concerned with anyone around you; for you do not look into the faces of men, but you teach the way of God in the presence of truth. Is it lawful to give taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we give or should we not?" 15 But having known their hypocrisy</p> <p style="text-align: right;">17 Jesus said to them, "Pay to Caesar the things of Caesar, and to God the things of God." And they were amazed at him.</p>

It is apparent when reading the passage on the right-hand side (*Without the Denarius*)—while briefer than the left-hand episode (*With the Denarius*)—still holds together quite nicely despite the removal of the coin. What we have is a story about Pharisees and Herodians asking Jesus a question, the omniscient narrator informing the readers that Jesus knows about their hypocrisy, and a response to their question about the payment of taxes to Rome and offering to God the things which are God's. Even in its simplicity, the passage *Without the Denarius* is nonetheless whole as an episode in which Jesus overcomes his enemies by skillfully extinguishing their question. The denarius mentioned in the episode is not vital to the story and this is made clear from the table above.<sup>5</sup> When the coin is removed, the literary structure of the episode does not collapse, which tells us that the coin is not necessary for the literary telling of the story. This leads to the obvious and very important question, which is: Why is the coin included in this passage?

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<sup>5</sup> This statement, nor this experiment as a whole, has anything to bear on the textual tradition of the account. The denarius has been removed in order to help understand its function within the text, but this does not mean that the text did not originally include the denarius (which it most certainly always did).



Throughout the scholarship on this episode, the answer to the above inquiry has almost unequivocally been to interpret the denarius as having a certain function within the text; however, what has not been unanimous is the precise identification of what that function is. In his article, Charles Giblin proposes that the coin insinuates that Jesus' vision is superior to his inquisitors and that he sees beyond what they are capable of perceiving (526). This request, according to the author, demonstrates that Jesus' sight goes beyond theirs. Giblin's reading is an interesting one since he stresses the function of sight in relation to the denarius in the episode. Giblin focuses on Jesus' request to see the coin and how the coin itself works to show that Jesus' outlook is superior to those of his detractors. I agree with Giblin's interpretation that the request to perceive the denarius is important. There is no doubt that the coin functions as a visual aid for the characters in the story as well as for the readers of the text. That Jesus has a heightened sense of perception than do the other characters is clear since he is able to perceive that the Pharisees and Herodians are trying to trap him in his words, but also that there is a difference between the physical payment of money to Caesar with the immaterial payment of things to God. This interpretation is further explored in the analysis of the coin's function below.

The work of Arthur Ogle has furthered Giblin's connection between the coin and sight by turning to the issue of idolatry. He writes:

[Jesus] asked for a denarius. To those of us unfamiliar with Rome's system of coinage that may seem insignificant. But it was a very deliberate gesture. The denarius was a Roman coin minted only in distant Gaul and used to pay the much-hated Roman legions. It was used by the Romans and the wealthy who collaborated with them. The denarius was a rare coin for the common people...

Jesus, probably holding the coin so those crowding around could see, asks whose image (the Greek word is icon) and inscription is thereon. Again our unfamiliarity flattens the dynamic tension all the people must have felt. The icon on the coin was Caesar. Jewish law forbade the presence of any icon in the temple—especially Caesar's. (256)

Ogle notes the significance that the icon of Caesar on the denarius would have had for the intended Jewish audience. He argues that for the contemporary Jews of Jesus during that time, the coin would have been viewed as a representation of an idol. The face of Caesar on the coin as an icon is an integral part of understanding the request for a coin and this request made by Jesus was deliberate (as opposed to something haphazard). David Owen-Ball

makes a bold claim stating that, aside from Giblin, "Scholars have not generally understood the role of the coin in the passage" (8). Owen-Ball singles Giblin out because Giblin reaches a similar conclusion in focusing on the coin as significant in its representation of the image of Caesar (11-12). The author expands on this notion, first proposed by Giblin, and focuses on the *halakhic* nature of the passage, comparing the text to various books from the Hebrew Scriptures. Owen-Ball's contention is that the passage exhibits features similar to rabbinical literature during the New Testament period and he approaches the text using rabbinical rhetoric in order to validate his hypothesis.<sup>6</sup>

Despite those who have seen the coin's function in line with idolatry and *halakhic* law, it has been convincingly argued that the question of idolatry in this episode is a non-issue. Paul Finney writes: "Given the presumption that early Christianity was both iconophobic and aniconic, it might be reasonable to suppose that the editor of the second Gospel would make his hero either comment on or condemn the idolatrous image that is made the centerpiece of the pericope. But this Galilean rabbi does neither" (629). While Jews were historically appalled by the idolatrous nature of currency to the point that they refused even to look at coins in general, it is unconvincing that such is the case in this episode since Jesus, a Jew himself, readily requests to look at the coin and calls for it from the Pharisees and the Herodians for this very reason (Hart 1984, 241-242). Jesus himself makes no assertion concerning whether the likeness of the emperor on Roman coins should be considered idolatrous because this was not the issue under consideration (Cuss 1974, 38). *Halakot* is of no interest to Mark or to the protagonist Jesus (Finney 1993, 640). Based on the evidence of the text, I agree with those scholars who dismiss idolatrous readings from this story. It is clear that Jesus is not concerned with idolatry and that the denarius was not included in the account in order to deal with this issue.

Turning to the work of Paul Finney, we find another, more conceivable, answer to the question about the coin's function. Finney uses a narrative approach and writes that:

The editor [of Mark's gospel] makes the entire dialogue hinge on this little object. It is the pivotal element in the give-and-take of protagonist and antagonists. The coin appears roughly at the center of the five verses and is made the fillip that

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<sup>6</sup> He uses the following monograph to shape his insights about rabbinical rhetoric: Daube, David. 1956. *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*. London: Athlone Press.

moves the dialogue forward... The coin is a sign (σημείον) that causes a pause, an interruption (and silence) in the flow of the dialogue. (631)

Finney's reading of the denarius' function is unique since he proposes that it works as a transposition within the story. The author recognizes the importance of the coin as an object with the ability to reverse the dialogue and the interaction between Jesus and his enemies. This reading of the function of the coin has been well received as William Herzog writes that: "While numerous commentators have recognized the centrality of the denarius, few have pursued the implications of their observations. Finney is correct when he observes that the request for the coin 'interrupts the dialogue and redirects its flow.'" (346-347). The denarius is included in the text because it allows for Jesus to turn the table on the Pharisees and Herodians.

Finney's interpretation, that the denarius interrupts the dialogue and thereby redirects the flow of the discourse, is inline with the breakdown of the literary structure of the episode offered by Marguerat and Bourquin. The 'transforming action' of the episode occurs at the moment when Jesus asks to be brought a coin and ends with the response to his question by the Pharisees and Herodians that the likeness and superscription are Caesar's (Marguerat and Bourquin 1999, 45). The authors define a 'transforming action' as "the outcome of the quest, reversing the initial situation: the transforming action is either at a pragmatic (action) or a cognitive (evaluation) level" (44). If the question is being posed to Jesus in order to trap him—as the omniscient narrator makes clear in v.15a<sup>7</sup>—then the request of a coin from Jesus is transformative in that it reverses the situation.<sup>8</sup> This reversal is typical of Jesus' character in Mark's gospel. Jesus is often confronted with a controversial question, which he skillfully manages to escape, and we see this technique employed several times in the gospel (Mark 11:27-33; 12:8-27). Jesus is strategic and when he is asked a question, he responds with yet

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<sup>7</sup> The narrator informs the audience that Jesus is well aware of their hypocrisy. He offers the audience this information at the outset of the story and leaves no room for Jesus to be confused or unsure. Jesus is presented as a wise protagonist who sees through the lies and the insincerity of those around him. Not only does the narrator inform us of this fact, but Jesus' rhetoric solidifies his perception when he tells his inquisitors: "Why are you testing me?"

<sup>8</sup> After they bring him a coin, Jesus' question is a banal one: "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?" Surely, they were aware of whose face was on the coin and the inscription since they are the ones who bring one to Jesus. But Jesus' question is strategic since it turns their initial query on them. The antagonists, in essence, answer their own question by saying: "Caesar's." Therefore, if we go back to the initial inquiry—which was whether or not to pay taxes to Caesar—Jesus allows his enemies to answer it for themselves that the money they carry has Caesar's face on it (and thus belongs to Caesar).

another question. In doing so, the antagonist is forced to make a decision and it shifts the power from the antagonist back to Jesus. Thus, Jesus, as hero of the narrative, alters the dialogue so that his questioners are put on trial.

Finney's reading is convincing since it is during the request for the coin that the dialogue shifts and Jesus goes from the one being questioned to the one asking the question. By requesting to see the coin, Jesus initiates the role reversal. While the Pharisees and Herodians inquire about paying taxes, they, in fact, have a part in answering since they are the ones who note that the image and transcription of Caesar is found on Roman currency. Jesus' addition that to give to God the things of God is what turns the saying into a witty statement since he masterfully distinguishes between the tribute to Caesar and the tribute to God, while promoting the implementation of both practices. In other words, when the narrator informs the readers that, "they were amazed at him" (Mark 12:17b) it is because Jesus has bypassed answering their question, which would have forced him to make a choice. Instead, the protagonist goes beyond this and demonstrates that taxes can be paid because one gives to God something different than what one gives to Caesar.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear from the overview of the scholars mentioned above that there have been many theories proposed about the function of the coin in the text. While the question of idolatry seems farfetched, it is fair to say that the coin does highlight the question of sight on the part of Jesus versus those of his enemies and the denarius strategically reverses the roles of the inquirers and the interrogated. By the end of the scene the ones who came to trap Jesus have become his admirers (Collins 2007, 557). In my narrative reading of the coin, I acknowledge that the denarius works to shift the power and to highlight the issue of insight that Jesus has over others. However, I also see the object functioning as a symbol for something greater.

When Jesus says to "pay to Caesar the things of Caesar" there is no doubt that he is referring here specifically to the paying of taxes to the empire. This duty is physically represented by the coin that Jesus requests and the denarius itself bears an image of its beneficiary. The artifact is a physical representation of that which is to be paid to Caesar. Therefore, the denarius works as a symbol for the materiality of the Roman Empire. If we turn to the second part of Jesus' statement he says to pay "to God the things of God."

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<sup>9</sup> What exactly Jesus means when he speaks of giving to God is an important question, especially for fully understanding this episode.

What is to be paid to God? Jesus is not specific on this point. The reader is not informed about what exactly is to be given to God; however, in this absence we have a demarcation between the visible things of Caesar (the visible coin that Jesus asks to see) and the invisible things of God. The importance of visibility is highlighted not just by the coin's physical presence in the scene, but also by Jesus' words to see the denarius (12:15b). When the hero Jesus asks the antagonists about the image and inscription on the coin, the reader is also visualizing the coin; the reader can imagine the physical inscription and physical representation of the image of Caesar on the denarius. The coin functions as a symbolic literary device which physically represents the things of Caesar for all to see. Caesar requests taxes from his people and the currency itself bears his image. So then it is fitting that the money is to be returned to him since he is pictured on it. As for the second part of Jesus' quote, we find that there is a contrast between the denarius that bears the emperor's image with the emptiness of what is to be paid to God.

Jesus does not hold anything up that bears the image of God nor can he physically showcase the things to be given to God. It is in this contrast between the physical coin and nothingness that the story informs its readers about the things of God. If we are to come back to the passage without the presence of the denarius, it is clear that the physicality of the empire's demand for taxes would not come through as strongly as it does when the coin is present. It is the physicality of the coin that Jesus shows and its visibility that offers to the audience a tangible representation of the emperor and his earthly empire. That taxes are to be paid to Caesar in the form of artifacts that bear his image is telling about what the empire is. It is a physical dominion over the earth. If we go back to the scene where the denarius is stripped away, then we find that reading the episode lacks tangibility. Without the coin in the scene, the things of Caesar and the things of God are merely concepts. However, with the coin in the episode being utilized as a physical representation of the materiality of the empire and of what must be paid to the Emperor, it is then better understood that its opposite is that which must be paid to God. The coin's symbolic representation of material wealth and the empire is important for the story because it allows it to be juxtaposed to the immateriality of God which is the focus of Jesus' message throughout the gospel, namely the Kingdom of God (cf. Mark 1:15; 10:23,25).

Ultimately, the question of importance for the text is payment and offering. What the Pharisees and Herodians are questioning Jesus about is the

payment of taxes and the issue of submissiveness to the Emperor. By the same token, Jesus responds that giving to Caesar what is his is acceptable for Jews because one can simultaneously give to God what is God's. That there is a difference between the two offerings is what the denarius highlights. The physicality is contrasted with that of God who is not earthly, whose image is not to be found anywhere, and whose payment is not in monetary value.

When we examine the denarius with a narrative lens, it can be argued that the coin functions as the turning point in the story where the initial situation is reversed in Jesus' favor. Additionally, the coin can be read as a literary device which functions as a symbolic image of the materiality of the empire. The denarius and its representation of materiality help to contrast the payment of things to Caesar with the immaterial things to be paid to God. Reading the function of the coin in this manner does not entail a dismissal of historical readings of the coin. The narrative reading of the coin complemented with a historical understanding of the denarius and its usage during this time period is an analysis explaining the artifact's multifaceted function within the pericope. The episode as we have it is neither history nor literature; rather, it is a combination of both, whereby each element is infused into the other and these are inseparable. One cannot appreciate the narrative function of the coin unless we have a solid understanding of the historical uses of denarii during that time period and how these played an important historical role in the taxation of the Roman citizens and the people of Rome's provinces. By the same token, an unaccompanied historical reading of the coin as a denarius, which probably featured the image of Tiberius (or someone else), is a reading that fails to truly appreciate the denarius' function within the story and how Jesus uses the prop to turn the tables on his enemies. The coin is an object, but it is also a symbol of the materiality of the Roman Empire. The coin is to be read not only as a historical artifact, but as an important detail which is relevant to the narrative of the episode.

While the scope of this article has been succinct in its exploration, the topic at hand is a large one and in need of continued analyses. How does the understanding of the coin shape or change contemporary readings of the overall episode? How does one read the use of the denarius in this episode with other mentions of currency which are to be found throughout Mark's gospel in episodes like the widow's offering (Mark 12:41-44), the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15-19), and the rich young man (Mark 10:17-31)? Beyond the borders of Mark's gospel, can such understandings of the denarius in the text help

shed light on the other versions of the story found in the two other synoptic gospels or in the Thomas or Egerton versions? How do redactional understandings change our perspective of the denarius? Was the coin an addition to Mark's text or was it removed by later incarnations of the story? All of these questions are crucial and in need of further scholarly attention. Future research should continue to explore the minute details of the gospel stories and in doing so—whenever possible—explore multifaceted readings since these can open up new avenues for our understanding of ancient texts. Owen-Ball states at the outset of his article that commentators throughout the history of Christianity have disputed the meaning of the episode about paying taxes and that, “At this point, disagreement is so widespread as to defy categorization” (1). If consensus on the overall understanding remains elusive, then perhaps this and future analyses on the function of the coin in the passage may be a step towards better understanding the episode as a whole and understanding the role of empire in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a recent publication on the importance of empire in the New Testament see: Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds., *Empire in the New Testament* (McMaster New Testament Studies Series 10; Hamilton, Ontario, Canada: McMaster Divinity College Press, 2011).

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