

THE VALUE OF THE JEWISH HALF SHEKEL OF SILVER

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*(The idea for this article arose from a discussion
with our M.E. PGGHP, Emory Ferguson)*

Recall that in the Mark Master degree, reference is made to a "... Jewish half-shekel of silver, equal in value to the fourth part of a dollar. . . ." Three questions immediately arise as a result of this statement: (1) is there a symbolic significance here; (2) which half-shekel is being referred to; and (3) what is its value in today's dollars? This article will attempt to answer these questions.

First, let's consider the symbolic "value", or significance of this amount. In Exodus 30:13-15, we read (KJV):

[13] *This they shall give, every one that passeth among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary: (a shekel is twenty gerahs) an half shekel shall be the offering of the Lord. [14] Every one that passeth among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering unto the Lord. [15] The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give an offering unto the Lord, to make atonement for your souls.*

Thus, during the time of the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem, and even before the first Temple was built, a yearly "appeal" was made for money for the treasury of the tabernacle, or Lord's House. The appeal began on the first day of the Jewish month of Adar. It was required of every Jewish male aged twenty and above. The money raised was used for purchasing animals that were to be used for sacrifices for the general public and for other sacred needs. The souls of all were of equal value, equally in danger, and all equally needed a ransom.

Applying this symbolism to the Mark degree, we notice that during the course of that degree, the half shekel is also used in the context of a ransom—not of the soul but rather of a material object representative of a pledge. If the recipient is unable to comply with the request, the object is returned with the price of its redemption, viz., an amount equivalent to a half shekel. It is of interest that in this case, the price of redemption is paid by the recipient along with the return of the object, not by him who tendered it. I believe that in the Mark degree the half shekel is thus a symbol of good faith and honest dealing on the part of both parties involved. Beyond this, it is also symbolic of that

great Masonic tenet of Relief. In returning the object to its owner along with its price, the recipient is in effect saying "I regret that I cannot comply with your needs, but here is something which I hope will assist you nonetheless."

Another question that arises in connection with the shekel: was it truly a coin or perhaps something else? In the early sixth century BC Judaea was ruled by the Persian Empire, but many of the Jewish people were living as exiles in Babylon. In 538 BC, the Persian King Cyrus allowed these people to move to Judaea where they lived under nominal Persian rule until Alexander the Great conquered the region in 332 BC. Several sources indicate that the principal coinage used during this period would probably have been the royal Persian silver *siglos* and gold *daric*, but there was no evidence that any were minted in Judaea. There was a series of very small silver coins inscribed "Yehud". (the Persian name for Judaea) which appear to have been struck locally with Persian consent (Calgary Coin). The Roman mint in Tyre produced Tyrian shekels and half-shekels, of a 95% silver purity, between the years 127 BC and 19 BC. In the year 19 BC Rome closed the mint in Tyre and began to import an inferior silver coinage from the Far East consisting of 80% pure silver (Baged Irvi).

The religious leaders in Israel, realizing that the new coinage was not sufficiently pure to fulfill the commandment of giving the Holy Half-Shekel appealed to the Emperor for permission to produce a ceremonial coin of sufficient purity to fulfill Jewish religious obligations. The Jewish religious leaders received special dispensation to produce the requisite coinage on condition that they continue with the motif of the Tyrian shekel, so as not to arouse objections within the Roman Empire that the Jews were granted "autonomy" to mint their own coinage (Baged Irvi).

In any event, all of this was long after the era to which the book of Exodus refers as well as after the construction of Solomon's Temple to which our Mark degree has reference. So what might the term "shekel" represent? Originally, a shekel was not a unit of coinage, but rather a measure of weight used as other units such as grams and troy ounces for trading before the advent of coins. The first usage is from Mesopotamia around 3000 BC. Initially, it may have referred to a weight of barley (the first syllable "she" was Akkadian for barley, Shekel (שֶׁקֶל) is actually the Hebrew word for *weight*. As the minting of coins was not begun until the late seventh century BC, the original payment of a half shekel would logically have been a measure of silver rather than actual coins. Archaeological evidence indicates that a shekel worth of silver (from limestone weights) was around 11.4 g. Thus, the half shekel would have been 5.7 g of silver. Coinage begins to become a significant mode of economic exchange in the mid-sixth century BC, but it is not until around 400 BC that its use becomes prominent in ancient Israel. From this time until 126 BC, we can only speculate as to which coins would have been the dominant silver coinage approved of by the priesthood for payment of the ransom. From the advent of coinage until the time of Alexander the Great, Judaea was under the Persian yoke. Thus, the Persian *siglos* (weighing around 8.45 g) or Athenian *tetradrahms*

(with weights approaching 17 g) would have been prominent in local trade (Berroll).

Assuming, then, that the half-shekel referred to in the Mark degree was a quantity of silver whose weight was 5.7 g and whose purity was 90%, what would be its value in today's money? Using the spot value of silver quoted at the time this article was written (March 3, 2012) we find it to be \$34.78 per troy ounce. One troy ounce (Toz) is 31.1 g. Thus, $1 \text{ Toz}/31.1 \text{ g} \times \$34.78/\text{Toz} \times 5.7 \text{ g} = \6.37 . Assuming a purity of 90%, this turns out to be about \$5.73, or roughly twenty-three times the fourth part of dollar!

The question naturally arises: Should the ritual be revised to be read "five and three-quarter dollars" instead of "the fourth part of a dollar [viz., a quarter]" to more accurately reflect the value of the half shekel in today's currency rather than what it was in the late 18th or early 19th century when the ritual was developed? This question could be argued both ways. On the pro side, in terms of accuracy of actual value, such a revision would be desirable; also, the purchasing power of a quarter today in order to relieve basic needs is negligible—but that of almost six dollars to do so would not be unrealistic. However, as Masonic tradition is hard to part with, and because the sum is essentially symbolic, perhaps the ritual is best left as it is.



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