The Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver  
A translation and introduction  

by Tony Burke and Slavomír Čéplö

The Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver (Leg. Sil.) is a brief apocryphondetailing the voyages of the money paid to Judas to betray Jesus, beginning with the coins’ origins in Mesopotamia and finishing with their use in the purchase of the potter’s field (Matt 27:7–10). Along the way, the coins figure in several important events in Israelite history and the life of Jesus. Through it all, they remain together, guided providentially to their ultimate goal. Some versions of the text connect the coins to “Judas penny” relics circulating in the Middle Ages. A reader who owns one of these pennies thus becomes part of the story, joining the long list of biblical figures who played a role in safeguarding the silver pieces.

Contents  
Leg. Sil. is found in two main forms: an Eastern text known in Syriac and Armenian, and a Western text in Latin with translations in a number of Romance languages. In the Eastern text, the coins were minted by Terah, who then passes them on to Abraham (1); after some time they come into the possession of Solomon (2) and then Nebuchadnezzar, when he plunders the temple (3). From there they pass into the hands of the Magi (4–5), who lose them in Edessa on their way to see the infant Jesus (6). Merchants find the coins and sell them to Abgar, the king of Edessa featured in Ep. Chr. Abg. and Doctr. Addai (7–10). Abgar sends them to Jesus, along with the Seamless Robe (John 19:23) purchased from a group of shepherds, as gifts for curing his illness (11). Jesus gives the coins to the treasury (12), and the priests use them to pay Judas to betray Jesus (13). After the betrayal, the coins return to the treasury and they are used to purchase the potter’s field where Judas is buried (14). The story begins similarly in the Western text, but after the episode of Abraham, the two traditions begin to diverge. An episode is added in which the coins are used by the Ishmaelites to purchase Joseph from his brothers (3–4); the Queen of Sheba then brings them to Solomon (5). The episode involving Abgar is missing; so, instead the coins pass directly from the Magi to Mary (7), who subsequently loses them during the family’s sojourn in Egypt (8). Eventually they come into the hands of a shepherd, who offers them to the adult Jesus but Jesus refuses the gifts so that the shepherd would himself deposit them in the temple treasury (9). Some of the Western witnesses add an explanation for how the silver pieces became the gold “Judas penny” relics (11) and finish with elaborate descriptions of the potter’s field (12–13).

Manuscripts and Versions  
The Eastern text of Leg. Sil. was available as early as the thirteenth century when Solomon of Basra incorporated Leg. Sil. into his Book of the Bee, a chronicle covering events and
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figures from creation to the final day of judgment. Solomon became bishop of Basra (in modern-day Iraq) around 1222. He includes the story of the silver pieces in a chapter (no. 44 in Budge’s critical edition) that relates the origins of a variety of artifacts from the Passion of Christ, including the purple cloak, the cross, and the location of his tomb. Budge’s edition of the Book of the Bee is based on three manuscripts:

London, Royal Asiatic Society, Syr. 1, fol. 26r–92v (1559)
London, British Library, Add. 25875, fol. 81v–157v (1709/1710)
Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Syr. 7, fol. 1r–146v (end 17th/beginning 18th cent.)

Budge also consulted a Garšûnî manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, 141 [formerly Poc. 79]; 1584) for comparison. The same East Syriac recension of Leg. Sil. is found alone (i.e., not as part of Bk. Bee) in three other manuscripts:

London, British Library, Syr. 9 (formerly India Office Syr. 9), fol. 242r–243r (1712/1713)
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Syr. 74 (formerly Sachau 9), fol. 20v–22r (1695)
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Syr. 309, fol. 51v–53v (1869)

Of these, only the first has been published to date. Leg. Sil. exists also as an independent text (again, not as part of Bk. Bee) in five manuscripts in West Syriac script:

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Syr. 197, fol. 93r–94v (16th cent.)
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Syr. 215, fol. 82v–83v (17th cent.), likely a copy of Syr. 197
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 71, fol. 134v–136v (ca. 1600)
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 369, fol. 130r–131r (ca. 1480), related to Syr. 71
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 480, fol. 241v–242r (1712)

Additionally, there are six Garšûnî manuscripts, reflecting three distinct translations from the Syriac, some showing affinities to the East Syriac text, some to the West Syriac:

Cambridge, University Library, Syriac Add. 2881, fol. 136v–139r (1484)
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 22, fol. 134v–136v (1527)
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 48, fol. 144r–145r (1906, but based in part on a MS from 1757)
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 479, fol. 123v–125r (1819)
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham, Mingana Syr. 514, fol. 140r–142r (1729 or 1759)
Mardin, Za’faran Monastery, 240, fol. 95r–97v (19th/20th cent.)

2. Additional MSS of the Book of the Bee are known, at least twelve at last count. Budge (Book of the Bee, ix) mentions four of these.
3. Many of the East and West Syriac and Garšûnî MSS described below are listed, with some infelicities, in Jullien, “La légende” 209–10, 213.
One more Arabic recension of *Leg. Sil.*, this time written in Arabic script proper, is preserved in the eighteenth-century Coptic Museum manuscript Serial No. 117 (Call No. Hist. 276). It comprises thirty-three folios and contains a work named in the explicit as “Mimar on the 30 pieces of silver for which Judas betrayed the savior.” The manuscript is defective at the beginning, but it can be clearly established that folios 1a through 3a contain the second half of *Leg. Sil.*, starting with the first appearance of the Magi. This recension is essentially identical to the majority Garšuni text, perhaps closest in wording to Mingana Syr. 22. The text then seamlessly continues with a sermon on the events just described.

Related to the Eastern text is an Armenian version appended to the Abgar Correspondence in two manuscripts: Yerevan, Matenadaran, 3854 (1471) and Matenadaran, 7993 (1692). In this telling Abgar, seeking relief from his illness, instructs Addai to find a gift fitting for Jesus. The Seamless Robe is taken from a group of merchants and silver coins from some shepherds and these are carried, along with the letter requesting a cure, by Addai to Jesus. After Addai returns to Edessa with Jesus’ response, Jesus asks the disciples if they know where the money given to him by Abgar came from. He then relates an abbreviated version of the remaining portions of *Leg. Sil.*

The Western tradition of *Leg. Sil.* is found incorporated in the works of four medieval writers, as well as in a number of related Latin manuscripts and translations into several European languages. The earliest source is Godfrey of Viterbo’s *Pantheon*, a world chronicle dedicated to Henry VI recording the history of the world from creation until 1185, the year of its completion. The text, a mixture of Latin prose and poetry, adapts *Leg. Sil.* into twenty-three rhyming triplets. Godfrey claims to have taken the legend from a sermon in Hebrew presented by the apostle Bartholomew to the Armenians, but likely this information was fabricated to give the legend an exotic and authoritative origin. Godfrey’s version of the legend appears also in a number of Latin manuscripts in European libraries—at least seven at last count, ranging in date from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The second source for the Western *Leg. Sil.* is Ludolph of Suchem’s *De Itinere Terrae Sanctae*, an account of Ludolph’s journey to the Holy Land in 1336–1341 published between 1350 and 1361. The chapter on the coins (chap. 39) is said to derive from a text called the “History of the Kings of the East.” A third version of *Leg. Sil.* appears in chapters 28–29 of John of Hildesheim’s *Historia trium Regum*, written between 1364–1368.

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6. Outtier, “Une forme enrichie.”

7. For extensive discussion of the Western versions see Hill, “Thirty Pieces of Silver”; see also Hook, “Legend of the Thirty Pieces,” 207–8.


and 1375 to commemorate the translation of the bodies of the three Magi to Cologne in 1164. In chapter 4, John lists his sources as "books written in Hebrew and Chaldee of the life and deeds, and all matters of the 3 kings"; the source for the coins is given specifically as "books of the Indians." Likely this too is a fiction.

John's Historia trium Regum achieved a certain amount of popularity and seems to have led to the excercption and abbreviation of Leg. Sil. in at least one manuscript: British Library, Add. 34276, fol. 33v (15th cent.). It may lie also behind a number of other manuscript witnesses to Leg. Sil.—British Library, Add. 34139 fol. 87r (1492 or early 16th cent.); British Library, 22553 fol. 144v (15th cent.); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAL 543, fol. 112v–113r (14th cent.); and Halle, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Stobl.-Wernig. Za 69m, fol. 23v–24v (15th cent.)—each of which reworks the tale considerably. Finally, Leg. Sil. is summarized by the pilgrim Felix Fabri of Nuremberg at the end of the fifteenth century in his account of travels in 1480–1483. Fabri says he read the tale in a "certain long and wordy history"; this may be the same source known to Ludolph (the "History of the Kings of the East") or perhaps Fabri drew the story from Ludolph's own account. Fabri shares Ludolph's description of the potter's field, and only Fabri and Ludolph mention the king of Godolia and the kingdom of Nubia. The relationships between the other Latin versions are less certain. Hill speculates that Fabri, John, and Ludolph all used the same source. Sylvia Harris says John took his account from Ludolph, and supplemented it with details from Godfrey, but Hook thinks the differences between the two writers indicate that John's account relies on a text closer to a form of the legend shared by Godfrey and Bk. Bee. Despite the exotic statements of origin for Leg. Sil. by Godfrey and John, the text likely became available to the writers in Latin, perhaps as a translation from a lost Greek original that lies also behind the Syriac tradition.

The Latin tradition spawned translations into several European languages including German, English, Italian, Spanish, Occitan, and Catalan. Of the Hispanic versions, the


14. The latter two sources have not been discussed in previous scholarship.
20. The German and English texts are simply translations of John of Hildesheim (discussed in Hook, "Legend of the Thirty Pieces," 207–8). The other translations are surveyed inter alia by Hook.
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Catalan poem is the most important as it contains traditions from both Godfrey and Bk. Bee, suggesting perhaps that the poem derives from an early form of the text.21

Leg. Sil. must be distinguished from another story of the silver pieces extant in Latin,22 Greek,23 Amharic,24 and Arabic.25 This particular version differs considerably from Leg. Sil. and ties the story of the silver pieces to the origin of the wood from which the True Cross was made. In the Latin version, Moses encounters three rods of cypress, cedar; and pine. The rods eventually come into the hands of David and he plants them in Jerusalem, where they grow together into one tree. Every year, for thirty years, David adds a silver ring to the tree; the rings expand as the tree grows. When Solomon builds the temple, a beam is needed, so the tree is cut down and the thirty silver rings are hung in the temple. Later the rings are given to Judas, and part of the tree is used for the cross of Jesus. Of interest also is a legend reported by an anonymous pilgrim in 1220 that the coins were minted at Capernaum, though the pilgrim erroneously conffates Capernaum with the coastal town Kefr Lam.26 Another legend claims they were made in a tower at Acco named the Accursed.27

Date and Provenance

Leg. Sil. was available to Godfrey of Viterbo (in Italy) in 1185, the year he wrote Pantheon, and to Solomon of Basra after he became bishop around 1222. Given the great distance between these two writers, it is unlikely that one of them is the source for the other; instead, their shared features indicate that they drew upon common tradition.28 Whatever that tradition was, it appears to have been unknown in Syriac lands before the ninth century, as it is not found incorporated in the eighth-century Chronicle of Zuqnin nor in the Cave of

25. See Carl Bezold, Kebra Nagast, Die Herrlichkeit der Könige (Munich: Verlag der Königlichen Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1909), xlii–lxi. For the English translation, see Ernest A. W. Budge, The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (London: Martin Hopkinson & Co., 1922), xxxix–xliv. This version of the story makes up part of a separate Arabic work (possibly with a Coptic Vorlage) preserved in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Chr. Ar. 264 detailing the transfer of the Israelite kingdom to Ethiopia. Bezold (p. xliii) describes this work as an extract from Kebra Nagast (a fourteenth-century account of the origins of the Solomonic line of the emperors of Ethiopia) with some original traits. Those original traits presumably include the story of the thirty silver pieces, since there is no trace of it in the rest of Kebra Nagast as edited by Bezold and translated by Budge. A version of this story is also preserved in an Arabic manuscript in Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, 4180 and Cairo, Coptic Museum, 645; see Georg Graf, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur (5 vols.; Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944–1955), 1:210.
28. These shared features lead Jullien (“La légende,” 217–18, 220) to conclude that there may be some truth to Godfrey of Viterbo’s claim to have found Leg. Sil. in a sermon by the apostle Bartholomew to the Armenians. Indeed, the Armenian text does contain elements common to both Eastern and Western traditions.
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Treasures (ca. 6th cent.), which was used by Solomon. The Western writers claim Eastern origins for their versions of Leg. Sil. but, again, these claims are likely fictitious.

Depending on the text's date of origin, it may derive ultimately from a Greek original, translated and expanded into Latin on the one hand, and Syriac on the other, with each branch of the tradition taking on regional coloring (e.g., the incorporation of the Abgar Correspondence in the Syriac and Armenian texts). Likely Leg. Sil. originated as early as the fifth century, when legends of relics associated with the Passion began to circulate. 29

The original extent of the text is difficult to determine, given the amount of variation between and within the Eastern and Western traditions. Certain movements are common in all witnesses: the creation of the coins by Terah, their presence in Egypt, their donation to Solomon for his temple (either directly from Pharaoh or via the Queen of Sheba), their plunder by Nebuchadnezzar, and their transmission to the Magi. The sources differ, however, on how the coins are transferred from Abraham to the Pharaoh—either through the purchase of the field for Abraham's family tomb or a village for Isaac, with some witnesses adding an episode narrating the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites by his brothers—and from the Pharaoh to Solomon—some Latin sources say they went first from Pharaoh to Moses to the Queen of Sheba, who gave them to Solomon. All sources agree that Jesus arranged for the coins to be deposited in the temple treasury, from where they were taken to pay Judas, but the sources diverge dramatically before this episode. In the Eastern tradition, the Magi lose them in Edessa, where they are found by merchants, who sell them to King Abgar. Abgar then sends the coins, along with the Seamless Robe, to Jesus in gratitude for healing him. In the Western tradition, the coins are among the gifts given to Jesus by the Magi, and they are lost when Mary flees to Egypt. They are found either by a shepherd or an Armenian astrologer; or they are brought to the temple by the shepherds at Jesus' birth or even by Mary herself. Occasionally, agreements occur between individual Eastern and Western sources, indicating, perhaps, some early elements to the legend; for example, the Armenian translation agrees with John of Hildesheim in having Terah (Arm) or Abraham (John) use the coins to buy a tomb (from Gen 23), and with all the Western sources in including the sale of Joseph; and Godfrey (and, to a lesser extent, John of Hildesheim), like the Eastern sources, incorporates the Seamless Robe. However, some of these elements could have entered the legend independently of one another from a desire by redactors to integrate additional biblical stories and relics into the story.

Literary Context

Leg. Sil. draws upon an assortment of biblical and nonbiblical traditions to craft a history for a relic crucial to Christian understandings of the Passion of Christ. In the process of composition and transmission, the author and redactors of the legend often make egre-gious literary and historical errors—for example, history is dramatically shortened in the exchange of the coins from Isaac to the unnamed Pharaoh (East 2–3), Nebuchadnezzar is

29. The most widely known of these is the Legend of the True Cross, the earliest form of which (in Gelasius of Caesarea's Historia ecclesiastica) dates to ca. 390 CE, though the cross was being venerated already in Jerusalem as early as the 320s. See further Jan Willem Drijvers, Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1992). Along with the True Cross, Helena is said to have found the nails of the crucifixion, the Holy Lance (John 19:34), and the titulus that was nailed above the cross (Mark 15:26 par.; John 19:19–22). The discovery of the Crown of Thorns, the Holy Sponge, and other relics followed in due course.
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called the king of Persia (East 4 note d, f), Rehoboam (not Zedekiah) is named the king of Judah during the plunder of the temple (West 6), and Abgar is healed before (not after) Jesus' death (East 11). The Western text, in particular, takes great pains to connect the coins to biblical stories of other coins, though the amounts, and even the currency, in the original stories are usually altered in the retelling. The money paid for Abraham's field, for example, is not thirty silver pieces (West 2) but 400 shekels according to Gen 23; Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelites (West 3) for twenty pieces of silver in Gen 37:28; Sheba's gift to Solomon (West 5) was not silver but gold in 1 Kgs 10:10; and similar transmutation occurs with the Magi's gift of gold to the infant Jesus from Matt 2:11 (West 7). The Western text also incorporates the unspecified money paid to the guards at Jesus' tomb (West 11; Matt 28:11–15). Notably absent, however, is Zechariah's mention of the thirty shekels of silver that God instructs him to throw into the treasury (Zech 11:12–13)—the account that serves as the basis of the story of Judas's betrayal in the canonical Gospels. The problem of the change in currency from gold to silver is not ignored in the text; some Western sources explain this by stating that, in antiquity, all coins were called silver (West 11). Despite its many errors and inconsistencies, Leg. Sil. endeavors to be "orthodox" in its telling of the history of the coins by remaining essentially true to the biblical record of Judas's role in the arrest of Jesus.

Leg. Sil. is not the only text with an interest in documenting the history of a celebrated biblical artifact. According to medieval variations of the Legend of the True Cross, the cross was made from the Tree of Life, an association common in typological readings of Jewish Scripture (e.g., Ep. Barn. 11–12; John of Damascus, Orthodox Fidei 4.12). A particularly popular telling of the Legend incorporates the Jewish legend of the "Quest of Seth for the Oil of Mercy." As the expanded tale goes, Adam is gravely ill and entertains his son Seth to journey to Paradise and return with the Oil of Mercy. Seth is refused entry but is given seeds from the Tree of Life, which he plants over Adam's grave. The seeds grow into three trees, from which Moses crafts his staff. The wood of the staff is eventually used by Solomon to build his forest house (1 Kgs 7:1–12), or the temple (depending on the source). It was then used as a bridge over a certain pond, and later it is revealed that this pond is the healing pool Bethzatha (John 5:2). When it came time to crucify Jesus, the wood floated to the surface and it was used to create the cross. The Staff of Moses, another artifact commonly read as a type of the cross, receives similar treatment in rabbinic texts. The ninth-century Midrash Yelamdenu (Yalkhult on Ps. 110 § 869),


32. The initial portion of the "Quest for the Oil of Mercy" (Seth's efforts to retrieve the oil and the angel's refusal) is recounted in the Life of Adam and Eve 40–43 (with further elements added in later recensions of the text) and Gos. Nic. (Latin Recension B) 19. For its elaboration in medieval legends of the True Cross, see Meyer, "Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus." The story is also found in Godfrey of Viterbo's Pantheon and the Rood-Tree Legend, a text that incorporates another account of the thirty silver pieces (mentioned above, see n. 22). On the connection between the two texts see Napier, History of the Holy Rood Tree, xxxi–iii.

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for example, traces the history of the staff from Judah who gave it to Tamar (Gen 38:18), then God gave it to Moses (Exod 4:17). Moses passed it on to Aaron (Exod 7:10), and David used it to slay Goliath (1 Sam 17:40). The Davidic kings continued to use it as a scepter, but it was lost in the destruction of the temple. It is said, however, that it will be given to the Messiah when he comes. The fourteenth-century Sarajevo Haggadah goes further, stating that God gave the staff to Adam, and it was passed along until the time of Jethro, who planted it in a garden where it could not be uprooted until Moses’ time. Solomon of Basra also details the providential transmission of the staff (Bk. Bee 30). He says Phineas hid the staff in the desert until God showed it to Joseph, who used it on his journey to Egypt and the return to Nazareth. The staff was passed on to James and Judas stole it. It was then used for the crossbeam of the cross. Interestingly, the staff appears also in the West Syriac manuscripts of the Eastern text of Leg. Sil.; this version of the story concludes with the statement that the coins and the Staff of Moses were thrown into the temple fountain (East 14).

The Western text concludes differently, stating that the coins remained together after Judas’s death thus allowing for their continued circulation as relics. John of Hildesheim even mentions having seen one of the coins in his own day (West 11 p. 308 n. d). Scholars have documented the existence of a number of “Judas-penny” relics. More than thirty of these coins are recorded in various sources; some of them are still extant, held in various abbeys and churches in Florence, Paris, and elsewhere. The references to the coins go back to as early as the fifteenth century and they seem to have been dispersed in France, Italy, Bologna, Rhodes, and Russia. However, not one of them was of the kind in circulation at the time of Jesus. For owners of these coins, Leg. Sil. could function as a sort of guarantee of authenticity or a history of their treasure; they could feel that they were participating in the providential transmission of these sacred relics, created thousands of years ago by the father of Abraham.

Some versions of Leg. Sil. incorporate yet another famous relic: the Seamless Robe first mentioned in John 19:23–25. Of the robe’s fate, the Gospels say only that, in fulfillment of Ps. 22:18, the soldiers cast lots for who would obtain Jesus’ clothing. One tradition states that it exists today in Trier, bequeathed to the city by Helena, the mother of Constantine, who found it in 327 or 328 along with the True Cross. Another tradition states that the Empress Irene made a gift of the robe to Charlemagne around 800. Charlemagne gave it to his daughter Thecrate, abbess of Argenteuil, where it remains today, though only in pieces. A third Seamless Robe resides in Mtskheta, Georgia. According to the Eastern text of Leg. Sil., the Robe was given to the merchants of Edessa by shepherds who received it from an angel (East 8). King Abgar then passed the garment on to Jesus (East 10–11). In the Western tradition, the robe is mentioned by Godfrey, who says it was given to the infant

34. Note also the brief mention of the purple cloak placed upon Jesus in Bk. Bee 44 (found here just prior to the story from Leg. Sil.). The cloak is said to have been given to the Maccabees by the “emperors of the Greeks” and was given to the priests to dress the temple.
35. For a detailed discussion of the coins see de Mély, “Deniers de Judas”; summarized and updated in Hill, “Thirty Pieces of Silver,” 103–16.
36. Felix Fabri, for one, mentions seeing one of the coins at Rhodes (see Stewart, trans., Book of the Wanderings, 1:2538).
Jesus by an angel and it became longer as he grew older (West 7 n. e); John of Hildesheim also mentions the robe, though only cursorily (West 11 n. d). The Leg. Sil. tradition seems to attract stories of other relics just as effortlessly as it draws in biblical stories of other coins.

**Translations**

The two texts presented here summarize the evidence of the Eastern and Western traditions of Leg. Sil. The Eastern recension is based primarily on the best of the West Syriac manuscripts: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Syr. 197, chosen because it suffers from fewer errors and omissions than the other manuscripts. Variants are provided from the East Syriac tradition, the Garšûni manuscripts, and the Armenian translation. The Western recension is based on Ludolph of Suchem's De Itinere Terrae Sanctae, selected because it is the earliest prose version of the text (Godfrey of Viterbo's Pantheon is earlier but it adapts the legend into verse). Noteworthy variants are provided from the other Latin traditions, including four of the unpublished Latin manuscripts noted in the introduction above (with the exception of Stolb.-Wernig. Za 69m as the condition of the MS makes it difficult to read).

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**Bibliography**

**EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS**


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**STUDIES**


The Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver  
(Eastern Recension)*

The origin and early history of the coins

These pieces were made by Terah, the father of Abraham. Abraham gave them to his son Isaac. And Isaac bought a village with them. b The master of (the village) brought them to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh sent them to Solomon, the son of David, for the temple he was building. And Solomon took the pieces and placed them around the door of the altar. c

When Nebuchadnezzar d came and took captive the children of Israel, he entered the temple of Solomon and saw that these pieces were beautiful, and he took and brought them to Babylon with the captive children of Israel.

And there were some Persians there as hostages. e When Nebuchadnezzar came from Jerusalem, they f sent him everything fit for kings. And when King Nebuchadnezzar saw that all they had sent him was beautiful, he released their sons and gave them many presents. He gave them also those pieces. And the Persians brought them to their fathers.

The Magi bring the coins to Edessa

When Christ was born and (the Magi) saw the star, g they rose and took those pieces and gold, myrrh, and frankincense.

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a. The titles in the Syriac MSS, with minor variations, are: "A demonstration of the origin of those pieces which Iscariot received as the price of Christ, those pieces which Judas received from the Jewish priests, where are they from and what is their story" (WSyr); "And so, with God’s help, the tale of the pieces which Judas accepted for the price of our Lord, what is the history of their transmission? The thirty (pieces) of silver that Judas accepted and for which he sold his Lord, were thirty pieces according to the weight of the sanctuary. These were equal to 600 pieces according to the weight of our country" (ESyr).

b. In Arm, Terah uses the money to buy "the cave with the son of Amor." Presumably this is Abraham’s burial cave from Gen 23, which was purchased from Ephron the Hittite for 400 shekels of silver. The burial cave appears also in the Western recension (see the note to v. 2). From here, like the Latin tradition, Arm moves right to the story of Joseph: "The Edessenians took the money and bought Joseph from his brothers. And the brothers of Joseph brought it as a gift to Joseph in Egypt."

c. Gar adds the detail that ten were placed on the upper frame and ten on each side.

d. Some WSyr MSS and Gar erroneously call Nebuchadnezzar the "king of Persia."

e. Some ESyr MSS add "according to the custom of the kings."

f. "They" likely refers here to the Persian rulers seeking to regain the hostages. This identification is made explicit in ESyr with its mention of the "king of the Persians" in this context.

g. ESyr (but not Bk. Bee) adds "as in the prophecy of Zarathustra" (though see Bk. Bee 37

Gen 11:27
Gen 21:33; 26:6, 17

1 Kgs 31:1; 6:10–21
2 Chr 4:11

2 Kgs 25:1–17; 2 Chr 36:6–7

Matt 2:1–2
Matt 2:11.
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6 They brought those pieces and set forth on a journey until they reached the vicinity of Edessa. The day grew dark and they fell asleep on the side of the road. In the morning they arose to continue their journey. They forgot those pieces where they slept and did not know it. Some merchants came and found the pieces.

7 They came to the vicinity of Edessa by a certain well. And on that very day an angel came to the shepherds of that land and he gave them a robe without a seam on the upper end. And he said to them, “Take the robe in which there is salvation for humanity.”

8 The shepherds took the robe and came to a well. And they found the merchants who had found the pieces near the well. They said to the merchants, “Will you buy this beautiful robe without seam at the upper end?” The merchants said to them, “Bring it here.” And when the merchants saw this robe, they marveled at it very much. The merchants said to the shepherds, “We have beautiful pieces fit for a king. Take them and give us this robe.”

King Abgar acquires the coins

9 When the merchants had taken the robe, they arrived in the city and stopped at an inn. Abgar the king sent for the merchants and said to them, “Have you anything worthy of a king that I could buy from you?” The merchants said to him, “Yes, we have a robe without a seam at the upper end.”

10 When King Abgar saw that robe of which there was no equal, he said to them, “Where did you get this robe?” They said to him, “We came to a certain well by the gate of your city. And some shepherds said to us, ‘We have a robe without a seam at the upper end. Will you buy it?’ And we looked at the robe and saw that there was no other like it in the world. We had with us thirty pieces stamped with images of kings which we gave to the shepherds and received this robe. And these pieces are worthy of kings such as yourself.”

When Abgar heard this, he sent for the shepherds and received the pieces from them. And Abgar sent the pieces and the robe to Christ for the good that he had done him with regard to the disease from which (Christ) had cured him.

for a reference to this prophecy). One of the Gar MSS has a similar reading: “As was foretold by Balaam their grandfather,” referring to Balaam ben Beor (Num 23–24) whom some apocryphal traditions identify with Zoroaster and connect to the Magi. Bk. Bee 37 identifies Zoroaster, this second Balaam,” with Baruch the scribe.

a. In Gar, the Magi rest at a well and, unbeknownst to them, the coins fall into it.

b. Gar adds, “So they agreed on the price and the merchants took the robe while the shepherds took the coins.”

c. ESyr lacks mention of an inn.

d. ESyr and some Gar MSS add “in the world.” In Cav. Tr. 50:8, the robe gave whoever possessed it the ability to bring rain.

e. ESyr ends the verse here with, “We saw it with some shepherds. And we bought it for thirty pieces of stamped silver; these too are worthy of kings such as yourself.”

f. In ESyr the merchants begin their reply, “We came to a certain well of water by the gate of your city. And we saw it with some shepherds.”

g. ESyr: “thirty pieces of stamped silver.”

h. Arm summariz es verses 2–11 as, “When Nebuchadnezzar deported Jerusalem, he broke the door and carried it to Babylon. The Babylonians gave it to the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans gave it to the merchants, and the merchants gave it to the shepherds. And Abgar, having re-
The betrayal of Judas

When Christ saw the robe and the pieces, he took the robe and sent the pieces to the Jewish treasury. Our Lord knew their secrets. That is why he sent these pieces with which he would be bought.

And when the Jews came to Judas Iscariot they said to him, "Deliver to us Jesus, son of Joseph!" He said to them, "What will you give me if I deliver him to you?" And they rose (and) brought those thirty pieces and gave them to Judas Iscariot.

And Iscariot returned them to the Jews. They bought with them a burial-place for strangers. And then they brought the pieces to Solomon's temple and threw them into a fountain inside the temple—the pieces, as well as the Staff of Moses the prophet—and thus hid them.

This completes the story of the pieces and the robe.

received it from the shepherds gave it to us (i.e., Jesus and the apostles)." The merchants and shepherds are mentioned earlier in Arm (v. 5). In recounting Abgar's commissioning of Addai, the text details how the merchants appeared before Abgar in Edessa with the Seamless Robe and the purple cloak. The robe was purchased by the merchants from the shepherds who received it from angels. According to Ep. Chr. Abg., Jesus does not directly cure the king; instead Thaddaeus/Addai is sent to heal Abgar after the death of Jesus.

a. ESyr ends the verse here.

b. In Arm, Jesus instructs his disciples to take the coins to the priests and say, "Jesus the Nazarean sent this to you."

c. ESyr and Gar report the exchange as, "And when Judas Iscariot came to the priests, he said to them, "What will you give me if I deliver him to you?"

d. Gar adds "which awakened his greed."

e. ESyr and Gar add that Judas "repented."

f. ESyr adds "and went and hanged himself."

g. ESyr and Gar explicitly identify this location as the potter's field. In Arm, like the Latin tradition (West v. 11), the priests give the money to the guards at the tomb, though in Arm the guards return it saying, "This money should not be kept, because it is the price of blood." So the priests buy the potter's field.

h. ESyr lacks this sentence, though the later history of the Staff of Moses receives much attention in Bk. Bee 30 (see above p. 300). Gar also lacks mention of the staff.

i. WSyr and some ESyr MSS lack this conclusion.
The Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver
(Western Recension)

The origin and early history of the coins

1 It is read in a certain account of the kings of the East who gave gifts to the Lord, that Terah, the father of Abraham, had made money, or coins, by order of a certain king of Mesopotamia named Ninus. He received thirty silver pieces for his pay.

2 These silver pieces he gave to Abraham, who spent them on journey in exile.

3 And these coins, passing through diverse hands, came into the hands of the Ishmaelites, and with them Joseph was bought from his brothers.

4 Afterwards, while Joseph was ruling in Egypt, these same coins were returned to the hands of Joseph from his brothers for grain. When they were restored to his brothers, the brothers gave these silver pieces to the treasurer of Joseph, who sent them to Sheba for goods on behalf of Pharaoh.

5 In the time of Solomon, the queen of Sheba came from the east, hearing of his wisdom, and gave the thirty silver pieces to the temple.

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a. Ludolphe does not provide a separate title for the Legend, nor do Godfrey and JH. The Leg. Sil. MSS related to JH bear the titles, "A report with respect to those thirty pieces of silver for which Christ was sold" (Lb, Ld), and "On the thirty silver pieces accepted by Judas when he sold Christ" (Lc). La has no title.

b. The JH related MSS explicitly state that Terah was the inventor of coins, making the thirty silver pieces the first coins made in the world.

c. Ninus is the legendary eponymous founder of Nineveh, though Gen 10:8–11 credits this accomplishment to Nimrod. La also calls the Mesopotamian king Ninus but JH does not mention his name. Lb, Lc, and Ld specify that the figure in the story is the king of Nineveh, though Lc goes on to say that his name was Naphtali (cf. Gen 35:25).

d. In Lb, Terah divides the coins between Lot and Abraham.

e. JH and La specify that Abraham went to Hebron and bought land for his tomb and for his wife and sons (cf. Gen 23); this tomb is mentioned also in Aram (see above, the note to East v. 1). According to Gen 23:15, the tomb was purchased for "400 shekels of silver." Lb, Lc, and Ld state that the double-caved tomb contained the bodies of Adam and Eve, a tradition found also in Zohar Chadash, Ruth 96. Godfrey says only that Abraham bought land from the men of Jericho.

f. The price for Joseph, according to Gen 37:28, is twenty pieces of silver; however, some early writers (e.g., Origen, Hom. Exod. 1:6; Test. Gad 2), in order to demonstrate that Joseph prefigured Christ, changed the figure to thirty. See further Erica Reiner, "Thirty Pieces of Silver," JAOS 88, no. 1 (1968): 186–90 at 188–89.

g. In Gen 42:25 Joseph refuses payment for the grain.

h. JH and La state that the coins were paid to the Queen of Sheba for spices at the tomb of Jacob and Joseph. Lb, Lc, and Ld introduce another stage in the journey of the coins. From the Egyptian treasury they came into the hands of Moses who gave them to the Queen of Sheba.
The coins and the Magi

In the time of Rehoboam, Nebuchadnezzar plundered the temple and carried off the treasures. He handed over the thirty coins with other treasures to the king of Godolia, who was with him in the army. Thus they remained with other treasures of the king of Godolia until the birth of Christ.

Then the kingdom of Godolia was transferred to the kingdom of Nubia. And so, when the Lord was born, Melchior, the king of Nubia, seeing in the star Christ born of a virgin, presented the thirty coins to Christ, because he could find no more ancient and noble gold in his treasures, according to the will of God.

The coins are lost and found in Egypt

Afterwards, the truly Blessed Virgin Mary, when fleeing to Egypt in fear of Herod, lost the thirty coins along with the other gifts of the Magi at the place where now there is the Garden of Balsam. A certain shepherd found them and kept them in his hands for thirty years. And then, when the fame of Jesus grew, this same shepherd came to Jerusalem and Jesus freed him from his illnesses.

When Christ was preaching and teaching in the temple, (the shepherd) of-
The Legend of the Thirty Pieces of Silver

ferred him the thirty coins and the other gifts of the Magi, which Jesus refused to accept, anticipating that (the shepherd) might offer the coins to the temple and place the other gifts upon the altar, which the shepherd did.

The betrayal of Judas

The Jews cast the thirty coins into the treasury, and afterwards they gave them to Judas for handing over Jesus.\(^b\)

When (the coins) were brought back by Judas,\(^c\) they bought the potter's field with fifteen coins and handed over the remaining fifteen to the soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb. And thus, when this had happened with the coins, which had been predestined, immediately they were divided and henceforth thereupon dispersed. But before this nothing happened that must happen with regard to them; as you have heard, they always remained together. But Scripture calls these coins silver, because in antiquity they called all (coins) silver; but no doubt in fact they were gold.\(^d\)

The field of blood

The actual field of blood is not large, as I said. It has an exceedingly deep pit dug in it, and a vaulted ceiling above, bored in round holes. Through those holes dead bodies are thrown down inside. And after three days nothing but the bones are found. Otherwise, a place so small would not suffice for so many dead bodies.\(^g\)

Near this field is a place very delightful and beautiful with trees, which the preaching brothers were trying to buy when I was leaving, but I do not know if they obtained it. It is near the very many hermitages of saints, cells, and oratories of grace, which are now deserted. Thus it is near the cave in which Peter continued denying Christ and hid himself and wept bitterly. Not far from this cave is the place where Judas, despairing, hung himself.\(^f\)

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a. Compare East verse 12, which similarly portrays Jesus as being aware of and directing his fate.

b. JH says of the other gifts, that the priest "lit the frankincense on fire upon the altar" and later "a portion of the myrrh they mixed with wine and offered it to the mouth of the Lord, and the remaining portion Nicodemus brought with the other spices to the Lord's tomb." Lb ends here.

c. Godfrey adds details about the death of Judas: "Judas Iscariot brought them back; Christ was murdered, whom he rejected, because he repented after the death of his master, and hanging himself by the noose, his stomach burst asunder." Lc and Ld lack mention of the division of the coins between the soldiers and the purchase of the field, and nothing is said about the coins being gold.

d. JH places the explanation of the currency change after his description of the field. He adds also that the coins remained together, passed along by heredity, as did "the Seamless Robe of the Lord, very famous up to the present day." John (along with La) goes on to mention a specific coin perhaps known to him, with a head of a king on one side and an illegible Chaldean letter on the other.

e. Of the Western recension witnesses, only Ludolph and JH contain a description of the field, though a similar depiction is given by Felix Fabri (vol. 1.1, pp. 10–11 in Stewart's translation) and John Poloner in his 1421 account of his travels (Aubrey Stewart, trans., John Poloner's Description of the Holy Land [Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society 6.4; London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1894], 12).

f. This final verse is found only in Ludolph.