

“Dirham” In The Time Of Joseph?

Mohamad Mostafa Nassar

Twitter: @NassarMohamadMR

Assalamu-‘alaykum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:

1. Introduction

And then sold him [Joseph] for a small price, for a few pieces of silver [darāhima ma‘dūdatin]; so little did they value him. [Qur’an 12:20]

In the story of Yusuf (Joseph) in the Qur’an, the brothers of Joseph, in order to get rid of him, dropped Joseph into a well. However, Joseph was picked up by some travellers who came by. They hid Joseph like a piece of merchandise and sold him for a small price in Egypt. The Qur’an describes this transaction as darāhima ma‘dūdatin. However, according to the Christian missionary Joseph Smith, the use of dirham during the time of Joseph, as narrated in the Qur’an, is an anachronism.

In June 2005, as part of a series of conferences and workshops delivered to the evangelical European Leadership Forum in Sopron, Hungary, Smith along with fellow missionaries Keith Small and Andy Bannister as well as others, were responsible for cascading current methods, tactics and strategies for evangelizing Muslims at an international level.

In one such lecture delivered to his fellow missionaries from various European countries, Smith discussed several alleged “exciting” errors in the Qur’an. Smith told his audience that the mention of the dirham in the story of Joseph in the Qur’an indicates that the Qur’an was being redacted long after it was finally revealed (according to the Muslims). He [says](#) [his statement is at time slice 30:48–32:58]:

... some of these are just exciting to use and you can just really play with your Muslims who bring these up or you can just take them to them and just question them and then say come back next week and come in with the answers. They’re good to do that, because for many Muslims they have no idea that these problems exist in the Qur’an, and the paper we’re gonna give you that’s gonna be on the internet I’ve got about 30 or 40 of these errors up there you can pull them down, these are at least 10 that I have here that are the easiest ones to use.

Let me just give you an example of the dirham, the dirham, and this will move right into what Keith's gonna be saying later and that is the story of Joseph again which is that complete story that we're looking at when Joseph was sold to the Egyptians he was sold for a few dirham counted out. And you ask about dirham counted out you assume therefore you're using coins. You count out coins.

You ask well did they have coins at the time of Joseph? There were no coins. You come to the British museum we have a tour there of looking at all the biblical evidence, two hours looking at all the biblical evidence, the archaeological evidence, the Old Testament, from the Assyrian, the Babylonian and the Persian period, and we can show you in the coin, in the numismatic section where there are dirhams, but the fascinating thing is there are no coins prior to the seventh century BC.

Coins didn't exist, it was bullion, it was weighted measure. Well, the Bible also makes the claim in Genesis, where do we have it here, Genesis 37:28 that Joseph was sold for 20 shekels. Shekels is not a coin it's a bullion. In fact we now know from the Menešic(?) tablets that's about a price of a slave around that time period. So not only does the Bible get the right denomination, it also gets the right currency.

Lets go back to the dirham. Well maybe God was giving a revelation to Muhammad at the time and using a currency that they would have known at that time, so maybe the people who were living there in the seventh century AD used dirham's. Did they? No they didn't. The dirham was only created in 642. Umar(?) was the one that he introduced the dirham to replace the drachma. But Muhammad died in 632.

So how could Muhammad have received a revelation using a coin that was yet to exist for another ten years? You got a problem don't you? It as if I were to ask you if I could buy that watch back in 1960 for 20 euros. You wouldn't know what I was talking back in 1960. Today you would but not in 1960. And here you got a difficulty. And immediately you can see what's going on. It looks like that this was a something that was put into the Qur'an much later.

Smith's argument can be summarized like this. Firstly, Joseph was sold to the Egyptians for a few dirhams, counted out. According to Smith, only coins are counted, and, there were no coins in the time of Joseph, it was bullion. Secondly, dirham was created only after the advent of Islam and it was Umar (d. 644 CE) who introduced the dirham to replace the drachma. Therefore, Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE) used the name of coin which did not exist for another ten years. In other words, the use of dirham in the Qur'anic account of Joseph is an anachronism.

Are Smith's analyses, assumptions and conclusions based on a sound understanding of the numismatic history of the ancient near east? In this paper, we would like to examine the claims of Smith concerning the dirham from the point of view of history and philology. We will also discuss the sale of Joseph in Egypt from the point of view of Egyptology to see if the ancient Egyptians did indeed use some form of silver for their transactions.

2. Dirham: A Historical & Philological Investigation

A discussion about ancient coinage involves some technical terms. Therefore, let us identify some key definitions. Firstly, the coin. Concerning the "coin" the Key Definitions In Numismatics says:

Coin: Piece of metal, marked with a device, issued by government authority and intended for use as money.[1]

The Seaby Coin Encyclopaedia defines "bullion" as:

Bullion: Uncoined metal, usually of gold and silver, in the shape of bars, plates, ingots or other regular forms.[2]

Armed with this information, let us discuss the issues surrounding the dirham, shekel and "coinage" in ancient Egypt.

HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

Smith has claimed that the dirham was introduced after the advent of Muhammad and that it was not created until the time of 'Umar. This is simply factually incorrect. The pre-Islamic romance poetry of 'Antara mentions the word dirham.

19. Or her mouth is as an ungrazed meadow, whose herbage the rain has guaranteed, in which there is but little dung; and which is not marked with the feet of animals.

20. Or as if it is an old wine-skin, from Azri'at, preserved long, such as the kings of Rome preserve;

21. The first pure showers of every rain-cloud rained upon it, and left every puddle in it like a dirham;
22. Sprinkling and pouring; so that the water flows upon it every evening, and is not cut off from it.[3]

Commenting on the presence of the word dirham in 'Antara's poetry Arthur Jeffery says:

It was doubtless an early borrowing from the Mesopotamian area...[4]

It is clear that the pre-Islamic Arabs were aware of the dirham. The history of the dirham can be traced back to the Athenian (or Greek) coin drachm. Athenian coins circulated widely in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 5th and 4th century BCE. These Athenian coins, once established as the recognised and universal currency, soon became an object of imitation by the people among them whom they had from long use grown familiar.

The imitation of Athenian coin types, especially drahm, in Southern Arabia, goes back as early as c. 400 BCE.[5] The Athenian imitation coins were also found in the northern Arabia Felix.[6] Athenian coinage also gave rise to a number of imitative series in Eastern Arabia as well. Excavations at Thaj, Dhahran, al-Khobar, al-Hofuf, al-Qatif, Ayn Jawan, al-Sha'ba, Jabal Kenzan, ed-Dur and Mleiha have yielded lots of coins with many of them being imitation drachms and tetradrachms.[7]

Not surprisingly, all the coinage found in these excavations shows the influence of the issues of Alexander the Great.[8] The drachm in Persia was passed on to the [Parthian Empire](#) (150 BCE – 226 CE) by the Greek [Seleucid Empire](#) (330 BCE – 150 BCE) and when the [Sassanid Empire](#) (226 CE – 650 CE) took over Persia, the drachm was known as drahm in the Middle Persian.

The pre-Islamic Arabs were either Persian subjects (in Mesopotamia) or allies (in Arabia). They also handled Persian currency and had a word for it – dirham. The Persian drahm was called dirham in Arabic;[9] and in the former it also meant a silver coin or money.[10] The silver drahm was the main currency of Sassanian Persia.

The Encyclopædia Iranica says concerning the dirham.

DIRHAM (< Gk. drakhmé "drachma"; Mid. Pers. drahm, Pers. derham), a unit of silver coinage and of weight...

I. In Pre-Islamic Persia

The dirham retained a stable value of about 4 g throughout the entire pre-Islamic period...

II. In the Islamic Period

For Muslims in the classical period, any silver coin was a dirham, and a dirham was also a monetary unit that might or might not be represented by a circulating coin. A dirham was also a small weight unit, usually not the same as the weight of a monetary dirham...[11]

Similarly the Encyclopaedia Of Islam says about dirham:

DIRHAM. I. The name of a weight derived from Greek δραχμή... II. The silver unit of Arab monetary system from the rise of Islam down to Mongol period.[12]

It is not surprising that the Islamic dirham was a logical outgrowth of the Sassanian drahm. The new denomination's very name was an adaptation of drahm, the name for the Sassanian silver piece. Not surprisingly, the Sassanian coinage and the Arab-Sassanian coinage during the advent of Islam were closely related.[13] The earliest Arab-Sassanian coins were struck in 651/2 CE, the year of Yezdegird III's final defeat.

The Arab-Sassanian dirhams were close imitations of Yezdegird's issues and were appropriately dated to his 20th regnal year, only adding that [they were struck "in the name of Allah"](#). [14] Like the drahm, the dirham was flat and very thin, measuring about 29 mm in diameter and weighing 2.9 – 3.0 gms.[15] Its weight suggested a lowering of standards from the Sassanian drahm which weighed about 4 gms. How does the dirham compare with Smith's highly proclaimed shekel? Concerning the shekel, The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia says:

Shekel, a weight and later a coin, which served as a standard value among the ancient Israelites and Jews. It was apparently based on a standard similar to that of the Babylonians who, as the principal trading people of the ancient Orient, impressed their own standards of currency upon the neighboring nations.[16]

Clearly, both the dirham and the shekel were used as weights and coins. However, the similarities between them end here. The dirham represented any silver coin. It could also be a monetary unit that might or might not be represented by a coin. Resultantly, one must exercise caution when discussing the dirham as it is a word with a multiplicity of meanings.

PHILOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

It has been recognized by both Muslim and non-Muslim philologists that the word dirham is of non-Arabic origin. For example, al-Jawālīqī (d. 1145 CE / 539 AH) states in his Al-Mu‘a‘rab:

And dirham is
an arabized form. In the past, the Arabs have used it in their speech. They did not know any other (currency); they ascribed it to Hijra`. The poet said: In all the markets of Iraq (he takes) a tribute, and in everything sold by any individual (he imposes) a one dirham.[17]

Similarly, al-Khafājī says concerning dirham:

(Dirham) Arabized form of daram.[18]

Jeffery says the ultimate origin of the word dirham is from the Greek drakhmé.[19] However, it is not clear how this word passed into the Persian before entering the Arabic vocabulary in pre-Islamic times. It is interesting to note that the Greek drakhmé originally meant “handful”, [20] then it was a weight and finally a coin.[21]

SUMMARY

From our discussion, there are three conclusions that can be drawn concerning the dirham.

It was known among pre-Islamic Arabs and the Arabic word dirham came from the Persian drahm.

During the advent of Islam, any silver coin was a dirham and it was also a monetary unit that might or might not be represented by a circulating coin.

It was a unit of weight and coinage.

Given these facts, it is clear that Smith’s arguments concerning the first appearance of dirham during the time of ‘Umar and that dirham being just a “coin” are conclusively refuted. Let us now turn our attention to the

phrase *darāhima ma‘dūdātin*, i.e., a few pieces of silver, countable. The Hans-Wehr Dictionary Of Modern Written Arabic defines *ma‘dūd* as

ma‘dūd: countable, numerable, calculable; limited in number, little, few, a few, some.[22]

Smith’s contention here is that only coins are counted and that there were no coins in the time of Joseph – it was bullion that was used for transaction. He then cites from the book of Genesis that Joseph was sold for 20 shekels. If indeed coins were counted and not bullion, it is surprising to see that Smith contradicts himself by claiming that the sale of Joseph fetched the value of 20 shekels, clearly an amount which was counted. Such egregious errors are not uncommon to Smith.

Perhaps he is not aware of that fact that bullions had [standardised weights](#) which enabled them to be counted. Otherwise currency would not have existed. One would have to barter (and even this would involve some counting!). Any mention of a currency that is not countable is an oxymoron or a contradiction. It is like saying we are speaking a language that cannot be communicated. By definition, a language is communicable, and in similar vein, by definition, any currency system based on weight or paper is countable.

The word *ma‘dūd* suggests a small amount of metal exchanged hands, which was countable. How true is that statement from the point of view of ancient Egypt? In order to understand how trade was carried out in ancient Egypt, let us now turn our attention to how metal was used in transactions in ancient Egypt.

3. Precious Metals As A Means Of Trade In Ancient Egypt

In this section we would like to establish certain facts such as the use of precious metals in ancient Egypt, the weights and measures used to quantify the Egyptian monetary system and the evidence for an early “coinage” system in ancient Egypt. This will clearly establish the role of precious metals, and silver in particular, as an important part of business transactions in ancient Egypt.

The manner in which precious metals were used will be discussed and then compared with the Qur’anic phrase *darāhima ma‘dūdātin* (i.e., a few pieces of silver, countable) used in the selling of Joseph in Egypt. Finally, the sale of Joseph as mentioned in the Bible and the Qur’an would be compared and contrasted, highlighting the problems with missionary polemics.

PRECIOUS METALS AS A MEANS OF EXCHANGE

Although there is considerable evidence of an early type of “coinage”, it is generally held by scholars that coins were unknown in ancient Egypt before the 26th Dynasty (c. 685 – 525 BCE).[23] Therefore, the prices of commodities had to be expressed in another way. All forms of commerce in ancient Egypt took place in the form of barter, while the value of the commodities exchanged was sometimes also expressed in quantities of copper, silver or gold.

While such a barter system certainly existed at the local level it should be considered as part of a larger system in which precious metal was employed as a form of currency. The famous Abydos inscription refers to the traders belonging to the temple and their trade involved precious metals.

The inscription reads:

I have given you a ship carrying cargoes upon the Great Green (sea), bring in for you the great [marvels] of God’s Land; merchants plying their trade, executing their orders, their revenues therefrom being in gold, silver and copper.[24]

Similarly, Papyrus Lansing from the New Kingdom Period, extolling the life of the scribe compares the scribal profession with others. It says:

The merchants fare downstream and upstream and are as busy as brass, carrying wares <from> one town to another and supplying him that has not, although the tax-people carry gold, the most precious of all minerals.[25]

The scribe here attempts to show the toil of the traders by contrasting the relative values of the metals in which they are said to deal. Since the composition is dedicated to the advantages of the scribal profession, it is simply pointing to the contrast between merchants and tax-collectors, suggesting that the tax people obtained the gold from hard-working merchants.

Another piece of evidence showing that the precious metals such as silver were used in transactions comes from Papyrus BM 10052, again from the New Kingdom Period. Here a legal defence is offered by a woman who was being questioned in connection with silver stolen from tombs. When asked to explain the source of silver in her possession, she explains:

... I got it [i.e., silver] in exchange for barley in the year of hyenas when there was a famine.[26]

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES USED IN PRECIOUS METAL TRANSACTIONS

With regard to precious metal transactions in ancient Egypt, there were different systems available, the one most frequently used being the comparison of the value of a commodity with a certain weight of copper or silver, and very rarely of gold.

This weight was called deben (dbn) [Figure 1] and its tenth part was known as kite (kdt) [Figure 2];[27] the latter was apparently not used with copper.[28] The deben was 13 gms during the Old Kingdom, its weight was increased to 91 gms during the Middle Kingdom.

In the New Kingdom Period, the deben was divided into 10 kite of 9.1 gms each, with lesser weight expressed as fraction of a kite.[29] Thus it provided a system of 'prices' for use in barter and trade. Weigall has shown evidence of an Old Kingdom writing of the word deben in the context of weights where it was written with a circular determinative.[30] In at least one instance this is more specifically depicted as an open ring.

Figure 1: Hieroglyph writing of "deben" (dbn).[31]

Figure 2: Hieroglyph writing of "kite" (kdt).[32]

Figure 3: Hieroglyph writing of "shaty" (sh'ty).[33]

The second way of expressing prices is by comparison of the value of a commodity with an object of silver which was variously called shat (sh't) / shenat (shn't) / shaty (sh'ty) / seniut (sniw) in ancient Egypt[34] [see Figure 3 for shaty (sh'ty)]. This unit of value has been the subject of extensive discussion among egyptologists.

The most accepted view among egyptologists is that of Peet who translated this word as "piece", although he thought that "ring" was the original meaning.[35] T. G. H. James preferred the even more neutral translation "unit".[36] Cerný who studied the value of the "piece" (i.e., sh'ty) was able to prove[37] a previously held view of Gardiner[38] that the sh'ty weighed 1/12 of a deben.

The relative value of metals were also available in ancient Egypt in terms of deben and sh'ty. The Rhind Mathematical Papyrus from the time of Hyksos of the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1674 – 1553 BCE) is one such

example.[39] The papyrus has 84 problems with worked examples and one particular example deals with the issue of relative values of gold, silver and lead in terms of deben and sh‘ty.

Example of reckoning a bag containing precious metals. If it is said to thee, a bag in which are gold, silver and lead. This bag is bought for 84 sh‘ty; what is assignable to each precious metal?

Now what is given for a deben of gold is 12 sh‘ty, for silver 6 sh‘ty and for a deben of lead 3 sh‘ty. You are to add together that which is given for a deben of each precious metal: result 21. You are to reckon with this 21 to find 84 sh‘ty, for that is what has been bought in this bag. It comes to 4, which you assign to each metal.[40]

The question now arises. Are deben and sh‘ty examples of the “coinage” in ancient Egypt? This we will discuss in the next section.

DEBEN AND SH‘TY (OR SH‘T): EVIDENCE OF “COINAGE” IN ANCIENT EGYPT?

It was stated earlier that coins were unknown in ancient Egypt before the 26th Dynasty. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Egypt had some kind of coinage right down to the Old Kingdom Period (c. 2700 – 2200 BCE). Let us now examine the evidence in chronological order.

Figure 4: Marketing scene in the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara (5th Dynasty, Old Kingdom Period).[41]

Perhaps the most informative scene concerning sh't occurs in a tomb belonging to Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara (Figure 4). Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were two senior officials who lived in the mid-5th Dynasty of Old Kingdom Period. The scene in their tomb shows a busy open-air market with traders offering a wide variety of goods.

There are at least four different vegetable and fruit stalls, two display fish, a woman trader selling vessels and two salesmen standing next to a pitch displaying the cloth. It is the last scene which is of interest to us. Here the two salesmen holding out the cloth, presumably linen make a bargain (row 4, right hand side):

... cubits of cloth in exchange of 6 sh't.[42]

The transaction values a particular length of the cloth at 6 sh't whereas all other transaction in the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep are straightforward barter. It is interesting to note that the buyer is not shown with any reciprocal object which he can trade against the cloth; but he is given the price of the cloth against sh't.

The same standard of value also appears in other Old Kingdom texts. The "House-Purchase Document" from Giza uses sh't to determine the value of cloth and furniture. Here the house costs 10 sh't; in exchange a four-ply cloth is given for 3 sh't, a two-ply cloth for 3 sh't and a bed for 4 sh't.[43]

There is also some evidence of a copper coinage. The Hekanakhte Papyrus from the 11th Dynasty[44] of the Middle Kingdom Period (c. 2040 – 1991 BCE) gives evidence of copper deben used for coinage. Hekanakht, a farmer, sent the letter to his agent saying:

Now see! I have sent you by Sihathor 24 copper debens for the renting of land.[45]

Strangely enough, Baer translated this as "24 deben of copper".[46] James says that the "letter says quite clearly '24 copper debens', not '24 debens of copper', which ought to signify 24 pieces of copper each weighing one deben." [47] It may be emphasized that the reference is made only to the number of debens, clearly suggesting that they were of a standard metal quality as well as of a standard weight.

Papyrus Boulaq 11, first published by A. Mariette,[48] republished by Weill[49] and then Peet,[50] dated to 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom Period (c. 1570 – 1293 BCE), is even more interesting. The majority of the transactions in this papyrus appear to be debits entered against the names of various traders, but there is one transaction that clearly shows a trader paying for his purchase with gold sh't.

6. Second month of Inundation, day 25, received from the trader Baki

7. gold 2½ sh't in payment for meat.[51]

Interestingly, this is the only known instance where a gold sh't was used instead of the usual silver. Acknowledging that this transaction involves payment in gold, James had argued from silence of the entries where commodities are valued in terms of their equivalent in metal that “we should not conclude that the payments were actually made in metal as specified.

If they were so made, it would suggest that metals, in particular gold and silver, were commonly used as currency’ in the truest sense; from which it should follow that substantial quantities of these metals were in circulation, available for trading, and regularly passed from hand to hand.”[52]

In the light of Papyrus Boulaq 11, where a trader specifically pays in gold and where commodities are valued in terms of sh't of gold, there is no reason to exclude the use of gold in commercial exchanges. It is likely that this trade happened in the upper levels of the ancient Egyptian society. We have already seen the famous Abydos inscription refers to traders dealing in gold, silver and copper.

The early 18th Dynasty stela of Ahmose-Nefertari from Karnak mentions the transfer of 1010 sh't in the form of gold, silver, copper, grain and land.

List therefore

Gold: 160, silver: 250, copper:

Total: 1010 sh't

I have given to her a male and female servant, x amount of grain, 5 arouras of land in Lower Egypt as the 1010 sh't though her office was (only) 600 sh't.[53]

The Rekhmire’s inscription from the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom Period is also worth mentioning. An examination of the tax record on this inscription shows that while the amount of gold paid as tax on offices range from about 5 to 6 deben, the commandant of the fortress of Elephantine pays no less than 40 deben and the commandant of the fortress of Bigeh paid 20 deben. On the other hand, the mayor of Edfu paid 8 deben of gold

as tax.[54] It appears that the officials from southern frontier were in a good position to obtain gold.

Papyrus Turin 1881 from the New Kingdom Period is an interesting case. It concerns gold, silver and copper provided by a temple for the rations of the Necropolis. In ancient Egypt it was common for commodities to be valued in terms of metal for *barte*. In this papyrus, however, the metals are valued in equivalents of *khar* of grain.

Receipt of the *hd* from the deputy *Minkhau* of the temple of *sis* for the rations of the Necropolis: good gold 1 kite, equivalent to 5 *khars* (of corn); silver 4 kite, equivalent to 6 *khar*; a kerchief, equivalent to 2 *khar*; and 20 *deben* of copper, equivalent to 5 *khar*.[55]

The metals along with the garment are classified as *hd* which apart from its primary meaning of “silver”, has also acquired the general meaning of “payment” for all sorts of commodities.[56] Commenting on this transaction, Castle says:

In the view of the fact that grain equivalents are given for quantities of metal, it may well be that the metal was provided for the purpose of purchasing the usual grain rations from a third party, more likely a private individual or trader than another temple. On the other hand, the grain equivalents may indicate the usual amount of grain payments which are being supplanted by payments in metal for some reason, perhaps on account of a temporary shortage of grain. In any case, the metal must be seen as a form of currency.

By itself, the fact that *hd* came to acquire the extended meaning of “payment” suggests that the exchange of silver in commercial transactions was or had been a general practice.[57]

Similar conclusions concerning the circulation of precious metals were reached by Kemp. He says that

... we should accept substantial amount of gold and silver was always in circulation. This would explain, for example, the gold found in the First Intermediate Period tombs of the Qau area... It would also explain how gold and silver featured prominently amongst the commodities used by provincial towns and districts for paying local taxes to the vizier's office, as depicted in the tomb of Rekhmira...[58]

If precious metals like gold, silver and copper circulated in ancient Egypt, what was its form? What did they look like?

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

It was mentioned earlier that Weigall has shown evidence of an Old Kingdom writing of the word *deben* in the context of weights where it was written with a circular determinative and in at least one instance this is more specifically depicted as an open ring.[59] The primary lexical value of *deben* appears to involve a circular shape, suggesting that originally in the context of metals *deben* indicated a ring,[60] perhaps of a fixed weight which later became a standard. Weigall's conclusions were rejected by Peet but the evidence is not that easy to dispose of.[61]

In the context of the Hekanakhte Papyrus, it was seen that the farmer proposed the payment of land using "24 copper *deben*". In this case it is clear that the *deben* is to be understood as a concrete object, not just a unit of weight. The implications of this are enormous. There exists a possibility that this means copper rings weighed a *deben* each. This is precisely what James had said.

As written this must be translated '24 copper *debens*', i.e. 24 pieces of copper, each weighing one *deben*... It may be inferred, therefore, that copper was prepared in small ingots or rings of standard weight for convenience of trade and exchange as early as the XIth Dynasty.[62]

It is interesting to note that the texts that were discussed do not say that either *deben* or *sh't* were weighed or tested for quality. This suggests that both the buyer and the seller were aware of what a *deben* or *sh't* meant and what they represented.

Peet also suggested that *sh't* originally referred to a metal object rather than to an abstract measure of value.[63] As mentioned earlier *sh't* appeared to exist alongside with *shn' / t*, in addition to another writing *seniu (sniw)*. *shn'* appears with *sh't* as a synonym in two versions of Spell 129 of the Book of the Dead.[64] In the Hekanakhte Papyrus which were discussed earlier, the writing of *sh't* appears to have been emended to *shn't* by the addition of *n*. This occurs three times in the document. In one case *n* is written inside the *sh* of *sh't*. [65]

Wente believes that *shn'* of Spell 129 of the Book of the Dead means "ring" or "seal".[66] Similarly Cerný has noted that *sh't* "occurs several times in an 18th Dynasty magical text, where it seems to designate the flat "seal" of a signet ring." [67] Thus both *deben* and *sh't* appear to have a shape of a "ring". Additionally, Castle has pointed out that *sh't* most likely was derived from *sh'*, "to cut", [68] and this would refer to its being cut from a parent coil of bar stock.[69]

The evidence from ancient Egypt points to the fact that precious metals were frequently handled in the convenient form of rings. Representations of gold and silver in this form appears in the tombs of Rekhmire[70] and Sobekhotep.[71] The rings often appear to be open and linked in the form of chains [Figure 5(a)]. Actual finds of treasures from Tell el-Amarna also show that silver was also handled in this form [Figure 5(b)].[72]

(a)

(b)

Figure 5: (a) A scene from the tomb of Sobekhotep, a senior treasury official of the reign of Thutmose IV. Africans bring gold rings and rough

nuggets from Nubia.⁷³ Silver rings, silver scrap and a crude ingot, a part of a hoard found in a jar at Tell el-Amarna. The third ring from the left just below the ingot shows an incised design, perhaps a way to ensure the integrity of the ring.^[74]

During the development of coinage, it was necessary to ensure and secure the integrity of coins from paring of metal. For this reason coins of precious metals came to be milled along the edge. The application of such a procedure may not have been possible in the case of metal rings and even if it did happen, it would have been unsuccessful. This would have certainly resulted in the metal being weighed in commercial transactions.

There appears to be attempts to protect the integrity of rings in ancient Egypt. Three metal rings in the Tell el-Amarna hoard were reported to have had incised designs on their ends [Figure 5(b)].^[75]

The integrity of the gold, silver or copper rings (of deben or sh‘t) would have been difficult to maintain against dishonesty and the need of fractional values (i.e., kite) must have resulted in much weighing. In other words, it would have been no longer possible or necessary to maintain the fixed weight of the rings. The standard was maintained by weighing. Weigall has shown several inscribed examples of weights from ancient Egypt of this standard.^[76]

It appears that the use of metal rings for trade was quite wide-spread. Metal hoards containing open rings and scrap similar to that from Tell el-Amarna have been found at Ugarit,^[77] and in one case it was rings and scrap of electrum.^[78] Sollberger has also noted the use of silver rings in Ur III texts and suggested that “the rings in question would be similar to those helicoidal rings well-known from North-European tombs of the early Middle Ages. Payments of gifts could be made by cutting off pieces equivalent to the desired amount.”^[79]

However, the most dramatic evidence of use of rings for trade comes from Mesopotamia. Powell has drawn attention to the fact that metals were traded in Mesopotamia in a form denoted in texts by Sumerian har, corresponding to Akkadian šewirum (or šemerum, semerum).^[80] He proposes that these words indicate a circular object.

They do not simply mean “ring” in the usual sense, but may refer to a coil of metal, a convenient form in which metals were handled and used for monetary purposes [Figure 6]. Castle points out that this corresponds closely to what has been mentioned about Egyptian deben, as to both etymology and usage.^[81]

Figure 6: Silver coils
from Mesopotamia used as “money” for trade.[82]

Powell’s suggestion is also supported by Old Akkadian text cited by The Assyrian Dictionary Of The Oriental Institute Of The University Of Chicago.

semeru: ... paid five (silver) coils, the price of twenty sheep...[83]

Just like Egyptian deben and sh’t, the nominal value of these rings may not correspond exactly to their actual weights as given in the texts. This is not a cause of difficulty since they would have been weighed in handling during commercial transactions.[84] To conclude the discussion with Castle’s study on trade in Ramesside times:

... clear that precious metals were handled as both scrap and in the form of helcoidal rings throughout the fertile crescent, and that they were used as a form of currency quite early in Mesopotamia, and in Egypt certainly by the New Kingdom Period, and probably earlier.[85]

WHAT IS IN THOSE BAGS TIED BEHIND THE SHOULDERS?

Another piece of evidence of early coinage in ancient Egypt, albeit indirect, often not mentioned, are the market scenes.[86] Perhaps the most conspicuous feature in the market scenes is, without doubt, the presence of men carrying small linen bags thrown over their shoulders, something akin to a purse [Figures 4 and 7].

This feature is attested in many of the market scenes from the Old Kingdom Period onwards. The colour of the bag over the shoulder is usually white. The question now is what could these bags or purses have

contained? There is a debate among egyptologists as to what purpose these bags served.

Figure 7: Mastaba depictions of market scenes from 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom Period showing the traders with small linen sacks tied behind their shoulders.[87]

It is clear that these bags could not have been used to bring the wares to the market. Men having the bags thrown over their shoulders are represented as buyers as well as sellers. Hodjash and Berlev distinguished two types of scenes: the market scenes where victuals are sold, only the buyers have bags and the scenes where manufactured goods are sold, the sellers are the ones with the bags.[88]

This also enables to draw a distinction between those who buy and those who sell. Hodjash and Berlev are of the opinion that the bag over the shoulders served as a receptacle to keep the money and valuables in, something like a purse, even though they doubted if metallic money existed in the ancient Egypt.[89] Since deben and shaty made from precious metals were used in commercial transactions in ancient Egypt, it would not surprising to see them handled in small purses.

SELLING OF JOSEPH IN EGYPT IN THE QUR'AN, TAFSEER AND THE BIBLE

It was mentioned earlier that the Qur'an described the sale of Joseph as *darahima ma'dudatin*. Al-Zamakhsharī in his *al-Kashshaf* [says](#) concerning the phrase *darahima ma'dudatin*:

{sharawhu} They sold him {bithamanin bakhsin} for less than the due price so obviously [...] {dara'im} that is, not dinārs {ma'dudatin} so few they were countable and were not weighed. Indeed, they would not weigh amounts less than an uqiyah which is equal to 40 dirhams and would count any amount below that (limit). Moreover, small amounts are qualified as ma'dudah, since large amounts cannot be (easily) counted. It was narrated on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that: (the price) was 20 dirhams. According to al-Suddī: It was 22 dirhams. [...]

Similarly, al-Tabari [says](#) in his Tafseer:

The correct stance about this is to say that: Allah Almighty mentioned that they sold him for a few dirhams, counted not weighed, without disclosing the exact amount neither in weight nor in count. Neither did He provide any indication in this regard whether in the Book or in an account through the Messenger – peace be upon him.

The price may be 20 dirhams, or 22 dirhams, or 40 dirhams. It could be more or less than that. Whatever that amount was, it was counted not weighed. Neither does the knowledge of the exact amount bring any benefit, nor does the lack thereof bring about any harm religionwise. We are ordered to believe in the apparent intent of the revelation, while we are not required to pursue any knowledge beyond that.

Although no price is mentioned concerning the sale of Joseph in the Qur'an and the commentaries only speculate from anywhere between 20 to 40 dirham, what is clear is that he was sold for a few pieces of silver which

were countable, not weighed, and well below the actual price of a slave. We have already noted that dirham was known in pre-Islamic Arabia and during the advent of Islam, any silver coin was called a dirham. It was also a unit of weight and coinage. **It also represented a monetary unit that might or might not be represented by a circulating coin.**

This makes dirham a word with a multiplicity of meanings. In the light of our study of coinage in ancient Egypt, it is clear that the description of the transaction *darahima ma'dudatin* (i.e., a few pieces of silver, countable) is accurate. Silver was used in ancient Egypt in commerce, in the form of *deben* and *sh't* (or *sh'ty*) even before the advent of Joseph in Egypt.

Furthermore, it was noted that the commercial transactions related to *deben* and *sh't* of gold, silver and copper involved counting, for example, 24 copper *deben* for the renting of land as mentioned in the *Hekanakhte Papyri*. It must be emphasized that since reference is made only to the number of *deben* that they were of a standard metal quality as well as of a standard weight.

Furthermore, the texts nowhere say that either *deben* or *sh't* were weighed or tested for quality. In the case of dishonesty, the standard was maintained by weighing. It was discussed earlier that inscribed examples of weights from ancient Egypt of this standard were available.

Smith's says that according to Genesis 37:28 Joseph was sold for 20 shekels. This was "about a price of a slave around that time period. So not only does the Bible get the right denomination, it also gets the right currency."

There are serious problems with Smith's claims. To start with, in the book of Genesis, **Joseph was sold twice**; firstly by his brothers "who sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt" (Genesis 37:28) and secondly, the Midianites who "sold Joseph in Egypt to [Potiphar](#), one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard" (Genesis 37:36).

The Qur'an, on the other hand, **mentions only one sale of Joseph to [al-Aziz](#)** in Egypt by travellers who picked him from a well (12:19-21). **Comparing the biblical and the Qur'anic stories, it is amply clear that neither of the two books mention any price for the sale of Joseph in Egypt.** But the Qur'an does describe this sale as the one involving a few pieces of silver which are countable. Undoubtedly, Smith has confused himself thoroughly with the stories.

Secondly, the claim that Joseph was sold for 20 shekels being "about a price of a slave around that time period" is not based on data from Egypt because this sale never took in Egypt! If he had bothered to check, he would have

found that Professor K. A. Kitchen used the data from the ancient Near East to work out the price of a slave around the time when Joseph lived.[90]

4. “Daric” In The Time Of David?

Does Smith’s evangelical Christian tour of the British Museum really look “... at all the biblical evidence ...” in relation to Jewish coinage? Given his cobweb of faulty assumptions and factually incorrect statements noted so far with regard to the dirham, let us now take the opportunity to discuss certain aspects of the Hebrew Bible in relation to Jewish coinage.

It is quite well-known that the author-composers of various books of the Old Testament were not eye-witnesses. They composed the books hundreds of years after the actual events and narrated the stories with terms that were popular in their own day to help the readers understand the events of the past. Such a colouring of the stories has resulted in quite a few anachronisms in the Old Testament, such as the mention of the ruler of Egypt as “Pharaoh” during the time of Abraham and Joseph, [when no Pharaohs existed in their times!](#)

Another example is the mention of the name “Potiphar” in the time of Joseph. The earliest attestation of the name [“Potiphar” in Egypt post-dates both Joseph and Moses](#) and it comes from the 21st Dynasty of the Third Intermediate Period (c. 1070 – 946 BCE) in ancient Egypt. Since we are dealing with coins, it is worthwhile saying something about the mention of “daric” in the time of David in 1 Chronicles 29:7.

In 1 Chronicles 29, David was asking an assembly of people to donate for the construction of the Temple. The people gave generously “toward the work on the temple of God five thousand talents and **ten thousand darics of gold**, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents of bronze and a hundred thousand talents of iron.”

According to the chronology of the Old Testament, David’s reign was between c. 1011 and c. 971 BCE.[91] Compared to this time period, when was daric introduced? Concerning the origins of daric, The Seaby Coin Encyclopaedia says:

Daric. A gold coin of the ancient Persian Empire, first struck under (and named after) Darius the Great, 521 – 486 B.C. It weighed 8.4 grammes, contained 3% silver alloy, and became the most widely diffused gold coin of the ancient world, accepted throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas and east as far as India.[92]

In other words, the Persian gold coin daric appeared some 400 years after the reign of David. Hence the use of daric during the time of David is an anachronism. Over 100 years ago The Jewish Encyclopedia had already catalogued several errors in the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Protestant Old Testament) arising from their study of Jewish coinage.

No credence whatever can therefore be placed in late Jewish stories mentioning coins of Abraham, Joshua, or David, or even Mordecai (Ber. R. xxxix. ; B. K. 97a). Such passages in Scripture as seem to point to the use of coined money during that period are either interpolated or late. **A notable instance of anachronism occurs in I Chron. xxix. 7, where among the offerings of the chiefs of Israel in the time of King David are mentioned 10,000 gold “adarkonim” or darics, coins which were not struck before the time of King Darius I, i.e., more than 400 years after David.[93]**

This notable anachronism has not gone unnoticed by contemporary Judeo-Christian scholars either and is admitted in many Bible dictionaries and commentaries. Let us survey some of them.

Concerning the use of daric in the time of David in 1 Chronicles 29:7, the HarperCollins Bible Dictionary says:

Daric... a gold coin, probably introduced by Darius I... It is used of Temple building contributions in Ezra 8:27 and **anachronistically in 1 Chron. 29:7.[94]**

Similarly, H. W. Perkin writing in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia mentions the anachronistic terms for money mentioned in the Old Testament. He says:

Anachronistic Terms for Money: Since coins apparently were not known in Palestine before the Exile, biblical references to money in the preexilic period are to be the weight in metal. Occasionally an author writing about an earlier event used a monetary term familiar to his readers rather than the word for the money of that earlier period. **This procedure may explain the term “daric” in 1 Ch. 29:7.[95]**

Similar conclusions concerning the use of daric during the time of David were also reached by The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary.

Daric [dār'ik]. A Persian gold coin weighing about 8.4 g. (.3 oz.), bearing the image of Darius I Hystaspes (ca. 500 B.C.) and therefore assumed to have been coined by that ruler; it is possible that the name derived from Akk. dārag mana (one-sixtieth of a mina). In the Old Testament the term (Heb.

‘adarkôn) occurs at Ezra 8:27 and at **1 Chr. 29:7 (during David’s days, likely an anachronism).**[96]

Such observations are also made in various Bible commentaries. While discussing 1 Chronicles 29:7, The Wycliffe Bible Commentary says:

The chronicler used the daric to evaluate this offering in 970 B.C., even though coinage was actually unknown to David.[97]

New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition also mentions this anachronism by saying:

It is made real for the Chronicler’s first readers by the use of the term daric (7), a coin known in their day but not in David’s.[98]

The explanation of this glaring anachronism is usually done by using the concept of [prolepsis](#), i.e., the assignment of an event or a name, to a time that precedes it. Prolepsis is used for the sake of convenience in order that the reader or audience can be communicated in a better way. The use of daric in 1 Chronicles 29:7 is explained by The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia by saying that the Chronicler used it as an “equivalent” to explain the money involved.

Daric... Since coinage had not been invented in David’s time, the reference in 1 Ch. 29:7 is to an equivalent in use at the time the Chronicler was compiling his work.[99]

A similar explanation is also made in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary which says:

The “daric” was a Persian gold coin, first issued by Darius I in the century before Ezra, though in David’s day this figure – equivalent to about two and one-half talents – would have represented the corresponding weight in small pieces of the precious metal.[100]

As it was mentioned earlier, the most likely reason for the existence of daric during the time of David was the late compilation of 1 Chronicles. The compilation might have dated well after the introduction of daric by Darius I. This has led Dillard and Longman III to the opinion that 1 Chronicles could not have been written before the 5th century BCE. Acknowledging the anachronism, they say:

In 1 Chronicle 29:7 part of the people’s giving for the construction of the temple is reported in darics. The daric is a Persian coin named after Darius; it was not minted before 515 B.C., and sufficient time must be allowed for it to gain wide circulation as a monetary standard also in Judah. These two

passages suggest that the Chronicler could not have written before the mid-fifth century. It is more difficult to establish the latest date by which he would have written, though it is improbable that he wrote later than the beginning of the fourth century.[101]

Given such a serious anachronism, it is surprising to see the evangelical literature dealing with the Bible “difficulties” hardly discusses it.[102]

5. Conclusions

In a lecture given to his fellow missionaries Joseph Smith had claimed that the use of the word dirham during the time of Joseph is an anachronism in the Qur’an. To support his claim, he said that the dirham was created only after the advent of Islam by ‘Umar, who subsequently introduced the dirham to replace the drachma. Furthermore, he added that Joseph was sold to the Egyptians for a few dirhams, counted out.

According to him, only coins are counted and there were no coins in the time of Joseph, it was bullion. Regrettably, Smith’s superficial knowledge of numismatics in general and the numismatic history of the ancient near east in particular, has caused him to make many gross errors fundamental in nature.

It was shown that pre-Islamic Arabs were aware of the dirham. The evidence comes from the pre-Islamic romance poetry of ‘Antara. The Arabs from pre-Islamic Arabia handled Persian currency and called it dirham which came from the Persian drahm. Both Muslim and non-Muslim philologists agree that this is a word of foreign origin borrowed into Arabic. It is clear that the use of the dirham in the Qur’an is not an anachronism, as the Arabs from pre-Islamic times were already aware of it.

Moreover, during the advent of Islam, any silver coin was called a dirham; it was also a unit of weight and coinage, and represented a monetary unit that might or might not be represented by a circulating coin. Given the multifarious nature of dirham, the use of this word in the story of Joseph represents silver “coinage”; the silver used as deben or sh’t in ancient Egypt.

A study of “coinage” in ancient Egypt clearly shows that precious metals, especially silver, were used as money in the form of deben and sh’t. During trade, the numbers of deben or sh’t were specified, clearly suggesting that they were counted and were of a standard metal quality as well as of a standard weight. The texts do not say that either deben or sh’t were weighed or tested for quality during commercial transactions.

Although very common from Ramesside times onward, the evidence of such transactions extend all the way down to the mid-5th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom Period, where, in one particular market scene, a particular length of cloth is valued at 6 sh‘t.

In assessing the evidence of coinage in ancient Egypt, Cerný came to the conclusion that sh‘ty “was a flat, round piece of metal 1/12 deben, that is about 7.6 grams, in weight, possibly with an inscription to indicate this weight or the name of the issuing authority”, adding “If so, the ‘piece’ was practically a coin.”[103] Although Cerný’s assessment was startling,[104] he was not too far off the mark.

In conclusion, the Qur’anic description of the transaction darāhima m‘dūdatin (i.e., a few pieces of silver, countable) is accurate from the point of view of ancient Egypt.

And Allah knows best!

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The Persian drahm was called derham in Arabic.

Similarly, James Mackay says:

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