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Coins in the New Testament

Nanci DeBloois

The coins found at Masada—Ptolemaic, Seleucid, Herodian, Roman, Jewish, Tyrian, Nabatean, etc.—testify not only of the changing fortunes of Judea, but also of the variety of coins circulating in that and neighboring countries during this time. Such diversity generates some difficulty in identifying the coins mentioned in the New Testament.

Since the beginnings of coinage in the seventh or sixth centuries B.C., Judea had been under the control of the Persians; Alexander the Great and his successors, the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Pergamum; as well as “local” leaders such as the Hasmoneans. Because of internal discord about 37 B.C., Rome became involved in the political and military affairs of the area, with the result that Judea became a Roman province in A.D. 6. Each change of leadership or power meant an accompanying change of coinage, from the gold and silver Philippi and Alexandreis of Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great, to the Roman provincial coinage bearing the image of Caesar Augustus and his successor, Tiberius. In addition to the monetary differences resulting from political changes in Judea, Jewish males from throughout the world brought foreign coins with them to pay the “temple tax” when they made their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

For these reasons, among others, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify with any certainty which coins are meant by the numerous references to them in the New Testament. Seven different types or denominations of coins are mentioned by name: denarius, drachma, didrachm, stater, assarion, kodrantes, and lepton. In addition, there are general references to money or sums of money, for example to argurion and talenton.
Probably the most recognizable of all the coins is the one described when Jesus was challenged about paying taxes to Caesar (Matt. 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:20–26). According to the accounts, Jesus was asked by the Herodians and the students or followers of the Pharisees, who intended to “entangle him in his talk,” if it was legal to pay the kensos (“census,” poll tax) to Caesar. When he asked them to show him the money to pay the tax, they showed him a denarius, a large silver Roman coin, and identified the image and inscription it bore as belonging to Caesar. Jesus’ reply is well known: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25).

The denarius Jesus was shown was stamped with the image of Caesar. But which Caesar? Beginning in 44 B.C. with an issue of silver denarii bearing the image of the wreathed head of Julius Caesar and the legend CAESAR.DICT.PERPETVO,1 each successive Caesar customarily issued silver (and gold) denarii stamped with his own likeness, or the imperial mints issued such coins in the emperor’s honor. A whole series of denarii were struck during the reign of Augustus Caesar (27 B.C.–A.D. 14) with his image on the obverse. Throughout the principate of Tiberius (A.D. 14–37), the imperial mints struck a series of gold and silver coins carrying his image with the legend T.I.CAESAR DIVI AVG. F. AVGSTVS, and on the reverse, a seated woman presumed to be Livia, Tiberius’s mother, with the legend PONTIF. MAXIM.2 (See fig. 1.) The practice of stamping coinage with the emperor’s image continued long after Tiberius. It is the silver denarius of Tiberius that has become known as the “tribute penny,” although the coin Jesus was shown could also have been a denarius of Julius or Augustus Caesar.

Fig. 1. Silver denarius of Caesar Tiberius. Traditionally, this denarius has been named as the tribute money shown to Christ. However, the Caesar whose image was on the “penny” brought by Christ’s detractors could have been Julius or Augustus.
The "census" was instituted in A.D. 6, when Judea was made a Roman province, with the requirement that it be paid in Roman coin. The amount was a denarius, the "standard" silver coin of the Roman Empire. The word is somewhat misleadingly translated "penny" several times in the King James Bible because in Britain d. (originally designating a denarius) is the abbreviation for *pence.* Clearly, however, the denarius was worth a good deal more than a penny. Although it is impossible to establish an accurate value for the coin in modern terms, a survey of the value of a denarius in New Testament times can provide some perspective. The accepted salary for a day's work by a common laborer was a denarius, as illustrated in the parable about the man who hired servants to work in his vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Each worker received one denarius whether he worked all day or was hired "at the eleventh hour." In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:35), the amount paid to the innkeeper for the care and lodging of the injured Jew was two denarii, or two days' wages.

Other references to the denarius occur in the story about the feeding of the five thousand. In Mark's account (6:37), the Apostles ask Jesus if they should buy two hundred denarii worth of bread to feed the crowd, and in John's (6:7), Philip says that two hundred denarii will not buy enough bread for so many people. In Mark 14:5 and John 12:5, which tell similar stories, the value of spikenard ointment is stated to be three hundred denarii (a year's wages for a laborer). In both stories, the ointment is used to anoint Jesus, but others object that a more praiseworthy deed would have been selling it and giving the money to the poor. To teach Simon, the Pharisee, a lesson about service and forgiveness, Jesus uses the example of two debtors, one owing five hundred denarii and the other fifty, both of whom are forgiven their debts (Luke 7:41).

One of the basic silver coins of the Greeks was the drachma, which circulated throughout the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean in the wake of Alexander the Great and his successors (see fig. 2). The New Testament parable of the lost coin refers to drachmas: "What woman having ten pieces of silver [the King James translation for ten drachmas], if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it?" (Luke 15:8-10). We are also told that the temple tax paid annually
Fig. 2. Obverse and reverse views of a drachma. These silver coins were struck about 130 B.C. in Rhodes. A drachma figures in the parable of the lost coin.

by every Jewish male—even when dispersed throughout the world—was two drachmas, or a didrachm (Matt. 17:24). The amount is established in the Old Testament at half a shekel (Ex. 30:13; 38:26). Some numismatists believe that the drachma was originally about equal in weight and value to a Roman denarius, but by New Testament times, the relationship appears to have been about four drachma to three denarii. A third-century-B.C. source says the drachma was the price of a sheep or one-fifth the price of an ox.  

The most valuable coin mentioned by name in the New Testament is the Greek stater, originally struck in gold but later in silver. The gold stater known as the Philippus, first struck by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, and the one known as the Alexandrios, for Alexander, continued to be struck and circulated many years after their deaths. (See fig. 3.) But staters were issued by other Greek cities and states, and the size and value varied from place to place. The silver stater of the New Testament has been estimated to be equal in value to eight denarii or four drachmas (or a tetradrachm or two didrachms). The coin Peter found in the mouth of a fish, with which he was to pay the annual temple tax of a didrachm for both himself and Jesus, was a stater (Matt. 17:27, where the King James Version renders it “a piece of money”). The thirty pieces of silver Judas Iscariot received for betraying Jesus (Matt. 26:15; 27:3, 5–6) may have been staters.  

Another Roman coin mentioned in the New Testament, although it is referred to by its Greek diminutive, is the “as,” or the
assarion. It was a bronze coin originally worth one-tenth of a denarius, but in the mid-second century B.C., it was devalued to one-sixteenth of a denarius to reflect its change of value in the market. At Pergamum and Ephesus, however, the denarius was worth eighteen assaria.

The King James Bible translates assarion as “farthing” both at Matthew 10:29, where it is given as the purchase price of two sparrows (presumably for sacrifice), and Luke 12:6, where the price of five sparrows is two assaria (cheaper in bulk, perhaps).

Also translated as “farthing” in the King James Version (Matt. 5:26; Mark 12:42) is kōdrantes, Greek for the Latin quadrans, a coin worth one-fourth an assarion. The context of the citation in Matthew is a lesson on forgiveness and reconciliation with one’s opponents, “lest . . . the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence till thou has paid the uttermost farthing [kōdrantes]” (Matt. 5:25). The passage in Mark refers to the widow who cast into the treasury “two mites [lepta], which make a farthing [kōdrantes].”

The last coin mentioned in the New Testament and the smallest both in value and size is the lepton, the widow’s “mite.” (See fig. 4.) Originally a small, Greek copper coin worth one-seventh of a chalkos in Athens, it was the smallest bronze coin used by the Jews and was valued at one-half a quadrans (kōdrantes), according to Mark 12:42. The word also appears in Luke’s version of the widow’s mite story (Luke 21:2) and the “prison” lesson (compare Matt. 5:25): “Thou shalt not depart thence, till thou hast paid the very last mite [lepton]” (Luke 12:59).

One coin not mentioned by name in the New Testament but probably best known to the Jews was the shekel. Like the drachma, the shekel was originally a weight rather than a coin. At the time of the New Testament, a Judean silver shekel was considered to be
Fig. 5. Tyrian shekel, A.D. 54/55. The obverse has the head of Heracles-Melqart, the principal god of Tyre, and the reverse, an eagle standing on a prow and the legend “Tyre the Holy and City of Asylum.” Even with the image of a god upon it, this and similar coins had to be accepted by the Jews.

worth four denarii, and a gold shekel was valued at fifteen silver shekels. In the Old Testament, a shekel (weight) of gold was the value of an ox or about two tons of grain; a ram was worth two silver shekels (Lev. 5:15). The average weight of the silver shekels that have survived is 11.4 grams or one-fourth ounce, about the same weight as an American half-dollar. Shekels, along with half- and quarter-shekels, were minted locally at Gaza or Ashkelon as well as at Tyre and Antioch. The thirty pieces of silver (triakonta arguría) Judas Iscariot received (Matt. 26:15) are believed by some scholars to have been Tyrian or Antiochan silver shekels (see fig. 5). At the ratio of 4 denarii per shekel, the amount Judas received would be 120 denarii, or about four months’ salary for a laborer, a sum considered appropriate compensation or “blood money” when someone was accidentally killed (Ex. 21:32).

Unlike the shekel, the talent is a weight or value that did not become the name of a coin. Two well-known parables in the Gospels use the talent: the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:24) and the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27). The unforgiving servant is excused a debt of ten thousand talents (Matt. 18:23) but refuses in turn to forgive a debt of one hundred pence (18:28). The King James version’s “ten thousand talents” is a literal translation of muriōn talantôn, although the modifier muriōn can also mean “countless,” a very large, but indefinite, number. The “hundred pence” is a rendering of beka- ton denaria, a hundred denarii.

Although the relative value of a talent is even more difficult to pin down than the values of the coins, it represents a great deal of
money. The Bible Concordance gives the value at 750 ounces of silver, based on a Roman penny as one-eighth of an ounce. Another source claims that a talent weighed 125 *librae* (Roman pounds of 12 ounces each) or that it was a variable weight between 58 and 80 modern pounds, depending on its composition, whether silver or gold, and place of origin—a Syrian talent, for example, was worth less than one-fourth the value of an Aeginetan or Attic talent.\(^\text{12}\) Borowski says it was worth 3,000 shekels or a Babylonian *kikar*.\(^\text{13}\) King Solomon’s annual income was said to be 666 talents of gold, and the gold mines of Krenides, taken over by Philip II of Macedon, produced 1,000 talents per year.\(^\text{14}\) Even making allowances for hyperbole, for a servant to owe 10,000 talents seems very unlikely and to be forgiven of the debt even more unlikely.

The parable of the talents gives amounts that are somewhat more realistic. One servant received five talents, another two, and a third only one talent, “each according to his ability” (Matt. 25:15). The first servant doubled his five talents, as did the one who received two talents, but the third servant, because of his fear, buried the talent and earned no profit on it. He was told by his master, “You should have put my money [*ta arguria*, the silver pieces] to the exchangers [*tois trapezitaes*], and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury [*tokos*, interest]” (Matt. 25:27).

Money changers were necessary to life and commerce in Jerusalem and Judea during the first century A.D. The variety of coins circulating there, plus the Judaic law that required payment of the temple tax in Jewish coin (or coin acceptable to the Jewish law) and the Roman requirement that the tribute be paid in Roman coin, created a need for “professional” money changers. These *kollybistai* had tables (*trapezai*) or booths at the city gates and on the porches of the temple in Jerusalem, where they charged a small commission. However, the money changers were notorious for cheating their customers and were the object of a number of rabbinical rebukes as well as of Jesus’ wrath when he drove them from the temple (Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15).

Because the relative values of the various types of coins were complex and because the intrinsic value of the coins gave rise to the practice of cutting or clipping metal from the edges of coins, especially those made from precious metal, merchants customarily...
### Table 1. Standard Relative Values of Roman Coins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coin name</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denarius aureus</td>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>122.70 grains</td>
<td>25 silver denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinarius aureus</td>
<td></td>
<td>61.39 grains</td>
<td>12½ silver denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denarius argenteus</td>
<td>Silver</td>
<td>61.39 grains</td>
<td>16 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinarius argenteus</td>
<td></td>
<td>30.69 grains</td>
<td>8 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sestertius</td>
<td>Orichalcum\textsuperscript{15}</td>
<td>421.00 grains</td>
<td>4 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dupondius</td>
<td></td>
<td>210.50 grains</td>
<td>2 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As” Quadrans</td>
<td>Copper</td>
<td>175.40 grains</td>
<td>1 “as”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Coin Equivalents in Jerusalem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coin name</th>
<th>Equivalents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denarius (gold)</td>
<td>25 silver denarii 8+ shekels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetradrachm</td>
<td>1 stater 1 shekel 3 silver denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didrachm</td>
<td>½ stater ½ shekel 1½ silver denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denarius (silver)</td>
<td>4 sestertii 16 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drachma</td>
<td>¼ denarius ¼ shekel 3 sestertii 12 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sestertius</td>
<td>⅓ drachma 4 “asses” 3 sestertii 12 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dupondius</td>
<td>2 “asses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As” Quadrans</td>
<td>3 chalco 2 semisses 4 quadrantes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{15} The weight of Orichalcum is estimated.
weighed coins to be sure they were getting the full amount for their merchandise. The exchange of monies was also based at least partially on weight, although there were apparently certain accepted equivalencies among the various types and denominations of coins.

The Roman system of denominations was based on the silver denarius, or *denarius argenteus*. Table 1 shows the standard relative values of Roman coins that were current in the empire for more than two centuries after the reforms of Augustus. Based on table 1 and equivalencies given in the New Testament and elsewhere, the approximations in table 2 can be formulated (coins are listed in order of decreasing value). The equivalencies are at best tentative; it must be remembered that the system employed in the western part of the empire differed from that of the eastern part, where the basic silver coin was the tetradrachm, with the fractional coinage consisting of *obols* and *chalcoi*. Asia’s silver currency was *cistophori*, each equal in value to three denarii. In Syria the silver tetradrachm was probably worth four denarii, while in other areas it was worth only three. Even when “asses” were struck in Asia Minor, they might have been only half the weight of one minted at Rome.

According to the historians Dio Cassius and Tacitus, the yearly salary of a foot soldier in the Roman legions between A.D. 14 and 84 was 900 *sestertii*, paid in three equal *stipendia* on January 1, May 1, and September 1. According to our figures, 900 sestertii equals 225 denarii, which, if the pay is based on a “military year” of 360 days, suggests that the soldier earned only slightly more than half a denarius per day, less than a laborer’s wage of one denarius, assuming both the figures are correct.

The conclusions we can draw from these estimates of value are that Judas’s price for betraying Jesus was between three and four months’ wages, that the amount paid by the Good Samaritan for the care and lodging of the injured Jew was about two days’ wages, that the temple tax paid by the Jews was about one and a half days’ wages, and that the tribute paid to Rome was about one day’s wage. The servant in the parable of the talents who buried his money instead of investing it buried the equivalent of three thousand shekels or about twenty-four years of a laborer’s wages.
The value of ten thousand talents, if these figures are accurate, seems beyond comprehension.

The sources of the coins circulating in Judea during New Testament times were as diverse as the coins themselves. In general, the Roman policy regarding the minting of money for Judea was the same as that of earlier governing powers—Persia, Alexander, Egypt, and so on. The imperial mints supplied the gold and silver coins, which were the larger denominations, and local or provincial mints supplied smaller denomination coins made of bronze, brass, or copper.

The earliest Jewish coins— with Hebrew script—are from the fifth century B.C. and are inscribed with the word beqa. In the next century, small coins inscribed yehud, the name of Israel while a Persian province, were produced. Both coins were minted in Judea “by permission of the Persians.”19 At other later periods, various “Jewish” coins were struck, for example, during the period of Jewish independence under the Hasmoneans, about 134-76 B.C., and a century later during the Jewish revolts against the Romans in A.D. 66-70 and 132-35. The Hasmonean coins bore legends both in Greek and Hebrew while the later “freedom” coins were inscribed only in ancient Hebrew. But both types bore symbols such as a pomegranate, a palm frond, a star, or an anchor, rather than the representations of gods or mortal rulers that were common on Greek and Roman coins. (See fig. 6; compare to fig. 5.)

Fig. 6. Left: Silver half-shekel struck in Jerusalem in A.D. 68 during the Jewish war against Rome. Weight 6.94 g. Right: Silver shekel struck in Jerusalem in A.D. 69. Weight 14.2 g. The obverse sides of both denominations show a chalice, and the reverse sides, a stem with three pomegranates and the legend “Jerusalem the Holy.”
Gaza is presumed by most scholars to have been the principal regional mint in the early fourth century B.C. Coins struck there imitated the fifth-century Attic coins, which bore the image of Athena on the obverse and the Athenian owl and Greek abbreviation for Athens on the reverse (see fig. 7). In fact, many consider the copies made at Gaza of these Athenian tetrads 'chms "among the most beautiful coins of this early period." 20 Alexander the Great established mints at Akko (Acre), Jaffa (Joppa), Ashkelon, and Gaza, as well as at Sycamine (Haifa) in Caesarea and Scythopolis in Samaria. 21 Coins issued by these mints were silver tetrads 'chms and drachmas and the gold stater known as the Alexandreios because it bore the image of Alexander.

During the Roman period, beginning in 37 B.C., the gold and silver coins for Judea were supplied by the imperial mints at Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, while the small denominations were minted locally by the Herods under the direction of the high priest or by the Roman procurators (governors). About 15 B.C., Augustus established Lugdunum in Gaul as his great imperial mint, which for the remainder of Augustus's reign and all of Tiberius's was to supply the Empire with gold and silver currency (denarii). The "small change"—coins of orichalcum and copper—were produced for Rome and Italy by the senate, while the provinces had their own supply of lesser-value coins, either in local currency issued with Roman approval or in special provincial issues. 22

Rome's policies and those of her predecessors regarding coinage are significant in several ways. When the same coins are used by people throughout a vast area, such as that governed by Rome, those common coins serve as "a symbol of cohesion and belonging, affirmed by constant use." 23 On a more pragmatic level, common coinage makes commerce easier for merchants who travel from country to country. The images on the coins—particularly those of the emperors—also provide symbols of the power or
authority of the state and of the emperors as representatives of the state: “The affirmation of worldly power through coin portraiture is nicely encapsulated in Christ’s words ‘of whom is this image and the inscription?’ ‘give to Caesar the things which are Caesar’s’ (Matt. 22:17–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:21–6).” Coinage portraiture may also provide a partial explanation for the persistence of “Jewish” coins; the Jewish people in particular would find the representations of pagan gods and mortal rulers on their coins objectionable. Coins minted by and for the Jews, except for those of Herod, bore images of plants or trees, impressions of the temple at Jerusalem, and other acceptable images.

Just as he used the portrait of Caesar on the Roman denarius to teach a lesson about the differences between temporal and spiritual matters, Christ used money in many other situations to teach the people. In fact, the number of references to specific or indefinite sums of money seems surprising, considering the fact that Jesus repeatedly taught the principle of valuing spiritual matters and denouncing (or keeping in perspective) material things.

Nanci DeBloois is Assistant Professor of Classics at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

1“Caesar Dictator uninterruptedly.” On the reverse were a caduceus, fasces, axe, globe, and clasped hands. Compare George F. Hill, Ancient Greek and Roman Coins (Chicago: Argonaut Publishers, 1964), plate XII.7. The message or “political programme” conveyed by the images on this coin are “Republican office, Felicitas, world rule. Pieta, and Concordia,” according to Christopher Howgego, Ancient History from Coins (London: Routledge, 1995), 75.


3Banks, Coins of Bible Days, 78.

4Betlyon states that the temple tax at the time Jesus was an adult was a denarius, but after the revolt of 66–70 C.E. it was doubled to a half-shekel. John W. Betlyon, “Coinage,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1082, 1086–87.


Borowski, "Shekels to Talents," 69.

Arndt and Gingrich claim it was a "unit of coinage," citing Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.571, and others. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "talanton."

Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "talanton" and "talantaioi."

Borowski, "Shekels to Talents," 68.


Orienchalcum is a compound of about 4 parts of copper and one of zinc. At the time of its introduction under Augustus, analysis shows that it contained from 78 to 72 p.c. of copper and from 22 to 28 p.c. of zinc. Later on, tin and lead were added to its composition and the proportions of the constituent metals were subject to a good deal of variation. Mattingly and Sydenham, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, 24.

The table is based on that of Mattingly and Sydenham, who say, "Quinarii never seem to have been struck in large quantities, and with very few exceptions these small coins rank among the rarities of imperial coins." Harold Mattingly and Edward A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 1, *Augustus to Vitellius* (London: Spink and Son, [1923]), 25.


Borowski, "Shekels to Talents," 70.

Betlyon, "Coinage," 1082, and plate COL.01.f.


Mattingly and Sydenham, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, 3-4.

Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins*, 43.

Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins*, 43.

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Woollen fragment bearing a notched, purple, L-shaped gamadia. Three of the cloth fragments found at Masada contain gamadia. The significance of these ancient markings remains obscure.