

Money in the New Testament

by

G. H. Shinn

Roman Coinage

The value of Roman coins gradually dropped so that by the time of Nero the basic coin, the silver denarius, had dropped in value from 126.3 grs. of silver in Julius Caesar's time to 115 grs. in Nero's. The *aureus*, or *denarius aureus* (golden denarius), was a gold coin introduced by Julius Caesar in his financial reforms of 49 BC. It is not mentioned in the Bible.

"The 'talent' was not a coin, but a unit of monetary reckoning. Its value was always high, though it varied with the different metals involved and the different monetary standards. The Roman-Attic was equivalent to 240 *aurei*. It was mentioned by Jesus in two parables: in Mt. 18:24 'ten thousand talents' is figurative for a very large sum of money, and in the parable of the talents in Mt. 25:15-28 it is referred to in v. 18 as *argyrion* (Greek word for *silver*), which may suggest that our Lord had the silver talent in mind." (*New Bible Dictionary*. "Money")

Two different talents existed in biblical times. The "silver talent" was a Jewish measure being a weight of about 3,000 shekels (about 114 pounds of silver!). The "golden talent" was a weight of gold, worth approximately 6,000 silver denarii. A Roman talent was a huge sum of money for the typical wage earner when 250-300 or so denarii were a typical yearly income. The following numbers are approximations, as the value varied from place to place, and time to time.

1 Gold Talent equaled 240 Golden Aurei or 6,000 Silver Denarii which was over 16 years of average wages.
1 Gold Aureus equaled 25 Silver Denarii - 1 silver denarius was considered a day's wage.
1 Silver Denarius was one day's wage which equaled 16 Copper Assarions.
1 Bronze Sestersus was 1/4 of a day's wage which equaled 4 Copper Assarions (Latin <i>as</i>).
1 Copper Assarion equaled 4 Quadrans, one of which was 1/64 of a day's wage.

Jewish Coinage

In New Testament times only one Jewish coin from earlier days had survived. It was the *lepton*, which was worth about half a quadrans, a very small amount indeed.

Greek Coinage

Greek money, originally from the mint set up at Acco by Alexander, and later minted in other places, was still being used during Roman times. The most valuable coin seems to be the silver mina, worth over three months' wages for a laborer, who was on the lowest wage scale at the time.

60 Minas equaled 1 Talent.
2 Tetrachmas equaled 1 Mina.
2 Didrachmas equaled 1 Tetrachma, also called a Stater.
2 Drachma equaled 1 Didrachma.
1 Drachma equaled 1 Roman Silver Denarius (a day's wage for a laborer).

The *didrachma* was the equivalent of the half *shekel* (no longer available in New Testament times) that the Jews needed to pay the temple tax. However, the coin was not very common, so a *tetrachma* was used for two people. This was the coin that Peter found in the fish's mouth to pay the tax for himself and Jesus (Matthew 17:27). It was probably thirty *tetrachmas* (*staters*) that Judas received for the betrayal of Jesus (Matthew 26:15).