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TEMAS BÍBLICOS PARA ESTUDO – THE ROMAN CURRENCY OF ANTIQUITY

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Before the introduction of the coin, the metals were used as article of exchange. The so-called “Fertile Crescent” in the OT was composed by Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and the Nile Delta with mountain ranges, which provided ores of gold, silver, copper, tin, lead and iron. In some places turquoise and other semiprecious stones appear. The order in which the main metals entered into use was: gold (Gen. 2: 11), silver and copper (also known as bronze or brass. Brass is a yellow alloy of copper and zinc; and bronze is a yellowish-brown alloy of copper with up to one-third tin) and iron. For the metal to be transported with ease it was transformed into jewelry, objects of daily use or characteristic shapes as thin bars or wedges, ingots, pots, powder or small fragments, and could be melted and used immediately for many purposes. To travel, the small pieces of metal were put in a purse or bag of leather or cloth.



Daric in the times of Darius I and Xerxes I and the Daric 4th century BC

The coin first appeared in Asia Minor in the late 8th century BC. In Persia it was introduced by Darius I (522-486 BC), with the name of daric (because of his name), and

that a gold coin with the approximate weight of 8.4 gr. The gold used in the coins was of high quality with a purity of 95.83%. It had the image of the Persian king armed with a bow and arrow. It was used until the invasion of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. The old gold coins (the daric) were melted down to make the coinage of new coins. I'll talk about the Greek drachma later.

The spread of minted coins in Judah seems to have been slow maybe because of the effigies they brought. At the time of the Maccabees, John Hyrcanus I (135-104 BC) minted small coins in bronze of 1/2, 1/4 and 1/3 of a shekel, showing in front an olive branch with the inscription "John (Yôhānān), the high priest and Jewish community." On the back, they imitated the Greek coins with its double cornucopia. Cornucopia was the Greek mythological symbol of abundance, agriculture and trade.



The coin of John Hyrcanus I: Judea, Hasmoneans. John Hyrcanus I (Yehohanan) 135–104 BCE. Æ Prutah (13 mm, 2.02 gr.). Obverse of the coin: 'Yehohanan the High Priest and the Council of the Jews' (in Hebrew) in five lines within wreath. On the

reverse, the double cornucopia adorned with ribbons; pomegranate between horns; small A to lower left (Meshorer Group B, 11; Hendin 457. Wikipedia)

In the NT the coins came from three origins: according to the Roman standard, according to the Greek standard (Antioch and Tyre) and according to the pattern of local Jewish money (perhaps minted in Caesarea). Because of so many different coins in circulation, there were many money changers in Jerusalem, especially during religious celebrations, when the Jews came to pay their tax in the temple. Three metals were used: gold, silver and copper (also called bronze or brass).

Rome

The Kingdom of Rome or Roman Monarchy existed in the period of 753-509 BC. From 509 BC the Roman Republic began. In 49 BC, Gaius Julius Caesar proclaimed himself dictator for life, but was murdered in 44 BC. In 31 BC, Octavian (Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian Augustus) defeated Mark Antony in the Battle of Actium and marked the date of the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire. Octavian, known as Caesar Augustus, reigned as the 1st Roman emperor, from 29 BC to 14 AD.



Coins of the Roman Republic and Empire – from Cassel's History of England, Vol. I – anonymous author and artists

The main Roman coins:

Roman coins, in circulation throughout most of the Republic and the Western Roman Empire, included the aureus (in Latin, plural aurei), of gold; the denarius, of silver; the sesterces (sestertius), bronze; the dupondius of bronze; and the *as* (in Latin, whose plural is *assēs*), made of copper. The *as* is occasionally called *assarius* (the plural is *assarii*; *assarius* is translated into Greek as *ασσαριον*, *assarion*) and was a bronze coin (a yellowish-brown alloy of copper with up to one-third tin), and later copper. It was used during the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. One denarius was worth ten asses (Around 141 BC, the value of the denarius created in 211 BC was adjusted to sixteen asses, due to the decrease in the weight of the *as*). One dupondius was worth two asses; one sestertius, four asses. It is known that during the 1st century, one *as* bought the equivalent of half a kilogram of bread or one liter of cheap wine, or then, two sparrows (Matt. 10: 29). All of these coins were used from the mid-2nd century BC to the mid-3rd century AD. Only the central government in Rome initially had the authority to mint gold coin. Roman provinces could mint bronze coins (of lesser value). Silver coins minted in some eastern provinces only circulated in their territory and met a local need.

Values of the denominations in the Imperial Period:

1 aureus of gold = 25 denarii
1 aureus of gold = 100 sestertii
1 aureus of gold = 200 dupondii
1 aureus of gold = 400 asses
1 aureus of gold = 800 semis
1 aureus of gold = 1,600 quadrans

1 denarius of silver = 4 sestertii
1 denarius of silver = 8 dupondii
1 denarius of silver = 16 asses
1 sestertius of bronze = 4 asses
1 dupondius of bronze = 2 asses
1 as of copper = 4 quadrans

Aureus

The aureus was a gold coin of ancient Rome, worth twenty-five silver denarii of silver, and functioned more as a unit of account than as an exchange currency. The aureus started to be coined more frequently from the time of Julius Caesar (49-44 BC). He standardized the coin's weight to 1/40 of the Roman pound (i.e., 8.20 gr.). The Roman pound was equivalent to 328.9 gr. During Nero's reign (54-68), the aureus' weight was reduced to 1/45 of the pound (7.30 g). After Marcus Aurelius's reign (161-169), the production of aureus declined and, with Caracalla (198-217 AD), its weight was once again reduced to 1/50 of the pound (6.57 gr.). The aureus has approximately the same dimensions as the denarius, but is heavier, due to the higher density of gold. In Jesus' time, according to archaeological discoveries, the denarius carried the laurel bust of Emperor Tiberius on the obverse, with his mother, Livia Drusilla, playing the role of Pax, holding a branch and a scepter, on the reverse. The inscription on the obverse is: TI. CAESAR DIVI AVG. F. AVGVSTVS (Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of the divine Augustus). On the reverse is PONTIF MAXIM (maximum pontiff). But we can see the same stamp of Tiberius also in the aureus, as in the image below. The golden of Tiberius is 19 mm and weights 7.55 gr.



Below, we can see the aureus of Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) minted in 193, to celebrate XIII Gemina Martia Victrix the legion that proclaimed him emperor. The 'The Twinned Fourteenth Legion' was a legion of the Imperial Roman army, created by Julius Caesar in 57 BC. The cognomen Gemina (Twinned) was added when the legion was combined with another legion of less strength after the Battle of Actium (between Octavian and Mark Antony, in Greece). 'Martia Victrix' means 'martial and victorious' and this cognomen was added later in 9 AD and 61 AD after military victories in Pannonia and Britain. Inscription: IMP. CAE. L. SEP. SEV. PERT[INAX] AVG. / LEG. XIII GEM. M. V. - TR. P., CO[N]S. Translating: Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus / Twinned Fourteenth Legion Martia Victrix / TR. P., CO[N]S. means TRibunus Plebis X, CO[n]sul III (tribune of the plebs and consul). 'Pertinax' may have been a tribute to his predecessor, Publius Helvius Pertinax (192-193 AD).



Denarius

The denarius (denarius, in Latin, plural denarii; in Greek: denarion δηνάριον) was a small silver coin, the most widely circulated in the Roman Empire. The denarius was worth 1/100 of the aureus. The word denarius is derived from the Latin *dēnī*, which means 'containing ten', since its value was 10 asses, but in the middle of the 2nd century BC (141 BC) it became worth sixteen asses or four sesterces. 'Denarius' is the origin of several modern words, like the French *denier* and *dinar* (national gold coin of several Arab countries, former members of the extinct Ottoman Empire, and was coined by the Arabs since the end of the 7th century and current in the Iberian Peninsula in the 12th century). 'Denarius' is also the origin of the common name for 'dinheiro' in Portuguese ('denaro' in Italian; and 'dinero' in Spanish). It was a silver coin first minted around 211 BC, during the Second Punic War (218-202 BC). 'Punic Wars' is the name given to a series of three conflicts between the Roman Republic and the Republic of Carthage, a city-state of Phoenicia in the North of Africa (between 264-146 BC), disputing the lordship of the Mediterranean Sea. The Punic Wars during the Roman Republic were restricted to the dominion of Rome on northern Africa, involving the Iberian Peninsula and some islands of the Western Mediterranean. The First Punic War was in 264-241 BC. The second was in 218-202 BC; and the third, in 149-146 BC. At the end of the Republic and at the beginning of the Roman Principate, one denarius was equivalent to the daily wage of a worker (the sum paid by the Good Samaritan to the innkeeper, in Lk. 10: 35, was two denarii). With one denarius it would be possible to buy about 8

kilograms of bread. In Rev. 6: 6, “A measure of wheat for a penny [*a denarius*], and three measures of barley for a penny [*a denarius*]”, indicates exorbitant prices in times of famine. One denarius these days corresponds to sixteen cents of dollar, and one talent, to 960 dollars. In Jesus’ time, the denarius was the currency used to try to trap Him on the issue of paying taxes (Matt. 22: 19; Mk. 12: 15; Lk. 20: 24). At that time, the denarius carried the laurel bust of Emperor Tiberius on the obverse, with his mother, Livia Drusilla, playing the role of Pax, holding a branch and a scepter, on the reverse. The inscription on the obverse is: TI. CAESAR DIVI AVG. F. AVGVSTVS (Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of the divine Augustus). On the reverse is PONTIF MAXIM (maximum pontiff), as seen below.



The denarius of Titus Flavius Vespasianus Augustus (79-81 AD), son of Vespasian

Drachma and Didrachma

The Greek coin corresponding to the Roman denarius was the drachma (Lk. 15: 8 – ‘the parable of the lost coin’), weighing 3.4 gr. In the 1st century DC, the Greeks equated the drachma to the denarius (Roman currency), but the Roman government calculated the official value of the drachma as three quarters of a denarius. The drachma (in Latin: drachmae; Greek: drachmé δραχμή, pl. δραχμές drachmés or δραχμαί drachmaí; derived from the verb δράττω, dratto, ‘hold’) was a silver coin used by many Greek city-states during several periods in the history of Greece: Archaic period (750-490 BC); Classical period (490-323 BC), the Hellenistic period (323-31 BC – from the death of Alexander the Great until the beginning of the Roman Empire with Caesar

Augustus) up to the Roman period (31 BC-1453 AD) under Greek Imperial Coinage. In the contemporary era, the drachma was reintroduced in 1832 and replaced by the euro in 2001, at the rate of 340.75 drachmae to the euro. In Matt. 17: 24-27 Jesus speaks of the two-drachma tax (KJV writes: 'tribute'; Strong #g1406), referring to a coin called didrachm – δίδραχμον didrachmon (Strong #g1323). He also speaks of a four-drachma coin (v. 27) called stater (statér στατήρ – Strong #g4715. KJV writes: 'a piece of money'). 1 stater = 1 Jewish shekel (Ex. 30: 13) or 4 drachmas; 2 drachmas = ½ Jewish shekel.

Stater	4 drachmae	17.2 gr.	στατήρ
Didrachma	2 drachmae	8.6 gr.	δίδραχμον
Drachma	6 obols	4.3 gr.	δραχμή

In the image below: the Greek silver drachma, weighing 5.57 gr. (Naxos, Sicily, 530-510 BC; Rev. NAΞION, of Naxians). The coin shows the head of Dionysos (Bacchus, to the Romans, the god of wine) on the left, with long, pointed beard, ivy wreath in his hair and a plain necklace around the neck. On the reverse of the coin one can see a bunch of grapes on stalk with two leaves.



In the first image above: the Greek silver drachma, weighing 5.57 grams (Naxos, Sicily, 530-510 BC; Rev. NAΞION, of the Naxians). The coin shows the head of Dionysos (Bacchus, for the Romans, the god of wine) on the left, with a long, pointed

beard, a crown of ivy in his hair and a simple necklace around his neck. On the reverse of the coin is a bunch of grapes on a stalk with two leaves.

In the second image above: Didrachm (Circa 275-270 BC); weight: 6.87 gr. Laureate head of Apollo to the left; Horse galloping to the right; star of sixteen rays above. Source: Tony Hardy Collection.

Antoninianus

During the 3rd century AD, more precisely in 215, the denarius was replaced by Caracalla (198-217 AD) by the double denarius, also known as antoninian (antoninianus), just before the period known as 'The Crisis of the Third Century' began (235-284). Therefore, the antoninianus was worth two denarii. It was slightly larger than the denarius and was represented with the emperor with a radiated or radiant crown (resembling rays of the sun) to indicate double value.

'Caracalla' was a nickname referring to a long Gallic hooded cloak the Emperor usually wore. His birth name was Lucius Septimius Bassianus. At the age of 7 years, his name was changed by his father Lucius Septimius Severus to Marcus Aurelius Septimius Severus Antoninus to make a fictitious connection to the family of Emperor Titus Aurelius Fulvius Boionius Arrius Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) of the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty, since Septimius Severus was of Berber origin, not Roman. Afterwards, his name changed to: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Caesar, Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus and Caesar Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Pius Augustus until his death. Because of his most known name, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the new coin was named antoninianus, although there are numismatists who say that this is a modern designation, not the name used in that time (in fact, unknown). Even after its extinction, the denarius continued to serve as a unit of account in the Roman Empire.



The seven antoninianii

First row: Elagabalus (r. 218-222 CE) – silver; Trajan Decius (r. 249-251 CE) – silver; Gallienus (r. 253-268 CE) – billon – Asian mint

Second row: Gallienus (r. 253-268 CE) – copper; Aurelian (r. 270–275 CE) – silver; ‘Barbarous radiate’ (copper); ‘Barbarous radiate’ (copper)

Several Roman emperors in the late 2nd century and early 3rd century gave this name to the coins they issued. Antoninianus was initially silver, but slowly became bronze with a minimal silver content. The silver content was actually equivalent to 1 ½ denarii, not two denarii as initially evaluated. With each new edition of the antoninianus, a smaller amount of silver was placed on it, depending on political and economic circumstances, this amount being gradually reduced, thus increasing inflation. At the end of the 3rd century, coins were made almost entirely of bronze, from the melting of old ones like the sestertius, or with the inclusion of copper and tin in order to form a ‘billon’ (an alloy with a low amount of precious metal) of a similar appearance to silver. In the image below (called ‘the seven antoninianii’), it’s interesting to notice on the second row that the two last coins are somewhat different and are called ‘barbarous radiates’, in Latin. Barbarous radiates are imitations of the antoninianus, so named due to their crude style and prominent radiant crown worn by the emperor. They were issued privately primarily during the Crisis of the Third Century (235-284 CE) in the western provinces. They are not generally regarded as forgeries since they were smaller and cruder than standard issues, so they rarely deceived someone. They probably functioned as small change.



Antoninianus of Diocletian (r. 285-305 AD)

Argenteus and Follis

In turn, the antoninianus was extinguished in 294 by the monetary reform of Diocletian (reign: 285-305), who created other currencies such as silver argenteus (it means ‘silver’, in Latin), similar in weight and thickness to the denarius of Nero. The theoretical weight was 1/96 of a Roman pound, which corresponded to 328.9 g; therefore, argenteus weighed approximately 3.42 gr. The number 96 was written on the reverse of the coin in Roman numerals: XCVI. He also created the follis (pl. folles), a bronze coin with a light silver cover.

See the follis of Diocletian minted in 300-301 AD:



The argenteus of Constantius Chlorus

Solidus

The aureus was replaced by the solidus (in Latin, lit.: 'solid'; plural: solidi; in Greek: nomisma chrysoun, νόμισμα χρυσουν, *nomisma* = coin; *chrysoun* = gold) in 312 AD, during Constantine's reign (r. 306–337). In fact, the solidus was first introduced by Diocletian (r. 284–305) around 301 AD, with the equivalent weight to 1/60 of the Roman pound of pure gold (therefore, 5.5 gr.) and with an initial value equal to 1,000 denarii. However, this solidus was minted only in small quantities and had only minimal economic effect. The gold solidus was reintroduced by Constantine I, permanently replacing the aureus as the gold coin of the Roman Empire and standardized in the proportion of 1/72 of the Roman pound of pure gold; therefore, weighing 4.5 gr. per coin and it equivalent to 275,000 denarii of silver (the old aureus was equivalent to 25 denarii of silver). The solidus has a larger diameter and is less thick than the aureus. The term bezant (in old French, 'besant'; from the Latin word for 'bizantium aureus') was used in the Middle Ages in Western Europe to describe several gold coins of the east, all derived from the Roman solidus. Until the end of the Western Roman Empire, the basic coins in circulation were the solidus of gold and some smaller bronze coins. The Roman currency 'solidus' gave rise to the medieval Italian silver coin 'soldo' (plural soldi), with the meaning of 'money.' It also generated the word 'soldado' ('soldier' in Portuguese), 'sueldo' (medieval Spanish) and 'soldo' in Portuguese, which means salary, for it was the currency with which Roman soldiers were paid. Constantine

stopped minting the silver argenteus of Diocletian soon after 305, while the currency coined with billon continued to be used until 360.



Solidus of Constantine I minted in 324 or 325 AD

The fractional coins of the solidus: semis and tremis

The fractional coins of the solidus were the semis (in Latin: *semissis*, 'half') and tremis (in Greek: Τρεμίσσης *tremissis*, or τριμίσιον, *trimision*; in Latin: *tremis*, 'a third of a unit'). The tremis was a coin introduced in 380 AD by Emperor Theodosius (r. 379–395) and remained one of the main currencies of the Byzantine Empire until the reign of Emperor Leo III the Isaurian (r. 717–741). One tremis was equivalent to 1/3 solidus, that is, 91.66 denarii of silver or 1.5 gr. The semis (in Greek: σεμίσσης *semíssis*; in Latin: *semis*, 'half a unit'; plural in Latin: *semissis*) was a coin issued twice, the first in bronze, worth ½ *as* (during the Roman Republic), and the second, in gold, equivalent to ½ solidus, during the late Roman Empire and Byzantine Empire. In this last period, when it was reissued, it was made of gold and weighed 2.25–2.78 gr., as a fractional measure of the solidus. At the beginning, around the 4th – 5th centuries, the semis of gold was minted in small quantities, but in the 6th – 7th centuries and the first decades of the 8th century it acquired greater importance. From 740 AD, like the tremis, it was rarely coined in the East, disappearing in the reign of Basil I the Macedonian (867–886). In the West, on the other hand, it remained in circulation in Sicily until the Arab conquest of the city of Syracuse (877–878 AD, by the Aghlabids, an Arab dynasty of emirs).



Tremis of Julius Nepos (474-480, even exiled from Rome after 475)



This is a Semis of bronze (270 BC) – Pegasus flying on both sides of the coin, with the letter 'S' under both Pegasus. Weight: 178.46 gr.



Semissis of Anastasius I Dicorus – 491-518 (Byzantine Emperor)

Sesterce

The sesterce (sestertius, in Latin) of bronze, was worth $\frac{1}{4}$ denarius (and therefore $\frac{1}{100}$ aureus). It was also created in 211 BC, at the time of the Roman Republic. The name comes from the Latin words 'semis' ('half') and 'tres' ('three'), that is, 'half third', because it was worth two and a half ($2\frac{1}{2}$ asses). When the value of the denarius was readjusted to sixteen asses, around 141 BC, the sesterce became equivalent to four asses, maintaining the proportion with the denarius: $\frac{1}{4}$ of the denarius. In 23 BC, during Augustus' monetary reform, the sestertius became a large bronze coin, in the same way as the dupondius, also of bronze (in fact, an alloy called orichalcum or aurichalcum). It lasted until the mid-3rd century AD as the basic monetary unit of the Empire, although in the beginning of the Severan Dynasty (193–235 AD) silver denarius was also used. The lowest value coin was the 'as' of bronze and was worth $\frac{1}{4}$ sestertius. Ingots were not considered currency and were used only for business in border regions. The Romans of the 1st and 2nd centuries counted coins, instead of weighing them, which indicates that the value of the coin was attributed according to its fiduciary value, and no longer the value of the metal.



A sestertius of Nero coined in Rome in 64 AD. The reverse depicts the emperor on horseback with a companion. The legend reads DECVRSIO, meaning 'a military exercise'. Diameter: 35 mm.

Dupondius

The dupondius (in Latin, pl. Dupondii) was an ancient Roman bronze coin, worth two asses ($\frac{1}{2}$ sestertius or $\frac{1}{8}$ denarius). It was created at the time of the Roman Republic, as a large cast coin (not minted), weighing 11-15 gr. With the monetary reform of Augustus in 23 BC, the sestertius and dipondius started to be manufactured with a golden bronze alloy, called orichalcum or aurichalcum, but it is not known exactly what it was like (It could be a gold-copper alloy, copper-tin, or copper-zinc-brass or unknown metal). It lasted until the end of the 3rd century in the Roman Empire. The dupondius prior to Nero don't present the radiated or radiant crown (resembling sun rays); therefore, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them from the as. The radiant crown to indicate the doubled value of the coin (in this case, two asses) was also applied to the antoninian (double denarius) and the double sestertius.



Dupondius of Trajan (98-117)

As

As (in Latin; plural *assēs*) is occasionally called *assarius* (plural is *assarii*; *assarius* is translated into Greek as *ασσαριου*, *assarion*) and was a bronze coin (a yellowish-brown alloy of copper with up to one-third tin) and later, copper. It was used during the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, worth 1/16 of the denarius.



An *as* of the time of Nero, different from the original Aes Grave, since it is after the monetary reform of Augustus

In the early days of the Roman Republic, the Romans replaced the use of Greek coins, first with bronze ingots (**aes signatum**), then with discs known as 'aes grave.' For example: in the 5th century BC the *aes signatum* (meaning 'stamped bronze') appeared. The *aes signatum* consisted of cast bronze ingots, engraved with a government seal, used as currency in Rome and central Italy. The designs shown are of a bull, an eagle and other religious symbols. The bronze bars did not adhere to a set weight standard, varying from about 600 to 2500 gr. when complete, because it seems that they were molten in subdivisions before being placed together. The earliest *aes signatum* (As you can see below) bore the image of a branch with side branches radiating from it, and was called *Ramo Secco* ('dry branch', in Italian). It was a large bronze ingot that measured about 185.00 mm x 90.00 mm and weighed about 1616.62 gr. 'Ramo Secco' bars were not issued by governing bodies, and could have been made

at any foundry facility. Today this ingot is found in Vatican Library, Rome, with the date of Roman Republic after 450 BC. Aes Signatum was the precursor of aes grave.



In the 3rd century BC appeared the '**aes grave**' (heavy bronze). In 280 BC, it was introduced as a large disc or coin of molten bronze and later, copper, the value of which was generally indicated by signs: 'I' for one *as* (i.e., the value of a Roman pound *: 328.9 gr.), 'S' for 'semis' ($\frac{1}{2}$ of the value, i.e., 164.45 gr.) and one dot or pellet for 'uncia' ($\frac{1}{12}$ of the value, i.e., 27.4 gr.). Thus, the *as*, as a Roman currency, got its name due to the unit of weight also called *as*, corresponding to the Roman pound as described above (328.9 gr.).

(*) A Roman pound: 328.9 gr. – "libra, n.", Oxford English Dictionary. 1st ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902. According to other researchers, the Roman pound was equivalent to 327.45 gr. – J. D. Douglas – The New Bible Dictionary, 2nd edition 1995.



This is a Semis of bronze (270 BC) – Pegasus flying on both sides of the coin, with the letter 'S' under both Pegasus. Weight: 178.46 gr. (probably an imprecision in the casting process, since the expected value would be 164.45 gr. – ½ Roman pound)



'Unciae' issued in Rome between 275–270 BC. Note the presence of a pellet to mark the currency value

Initially these cast coins were large in size, compared to those found in the 5th century CE. These first cast bronze coins ('aes grave') were about 11 cm in diameter and 4 mm thick.

In the beginning, the *as* was produced by pouring molten metal over a mold, then using the hammer method: a circular piece of metal heated to red was positioned between two molds in low relief, receiving a strong hammer struck. The result was the impression of the mold on the coin. During the Republic, the first series of *aes grave* (around 240 BC) featured the faces of Janus and Mercury engraved on the coin, in addition to the mark 'I', indicating the value of the coin in Roman numerals (1 *as* = 1 Roman pound). The next series (225 BC) featured the faces of Janus and Mercury on the obverse of the coin; on the reverse, the Roman numeral 'I' appeared above, and the prow of a galley below.



Aes Grave (240 to 225 BC). On the obverse, to the left, the faces of Janus and Mercury; on the reverse, to the right, the Roman numeral 'I' on the top, and below it, the prow of a galley.



An engraving of an *as* from the time of the Roman Republic, explaining what we talked about above

The last series of aes grave was the 'wheel', due to the six-spoke wheel that appears on the reverse.

The *as* remained as a cast coin for about seventy years, but afterwards its weight was reduced in several stages, with an 'sextantal as' being introduced in 211-210 BC. That means it weighed a sixth of a pound, that is, 54.81 gr. Thus, the bronze coin ceased to be cast to be coined. At the same time, a silver coin, the denarius, was also introduced. Previous Roman silver coins had been minted in Greek weight standards, which facilitated their use in southern Italy and across the Adriatic, but all Roman coins were now in Roman weight standards.

With the monetary reform of Augustus (23 BC), the *as* stopped being melted and started to be minted in pure copper. He also reduced its weight to 1/30 of a Roman pound (10.9 gr.). *As* continued to be produced until the 3rd century AD and was the lowest denomination currency to be issued regularly during the Empire. During the first century, one *as* bought the equivalent of half a kilogram of bread or a liter of cheap wine or two sparrows (Matt. 10: 29).

The fractions and the multiples of the *as*

The following fractions of the *as* were also produced: bes ($\frac{2}{3}$), semis or semis ($\frac{1}{2}$), quincunx ($\frac{5}{12}$), triens ($\frac{1}{3}$), quadrans ($\frac{1}{4}$), sextans ($\frac{1}{6}$), uncia ($\frac{1}{2}$ *as*, also a unit of common weight) and semuncia ($\frac{1}{24}$), as well as its multiples: dupondius (2 asses), sestertius (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ asses), tressis (3 asses) and the denarius (10 asses; later it became 16 asses).

Tressis was a Roman bronze coin and was minted during the time of the Roman Republic in 260 BC and later in 215 BC in Rome. On one side of that coin there are three vertical lines, each of which represents the value of one *as*. On the other side there is the figure of a human head looking at the goddess Rome. After the introduction of the denarius the currency was abolished.

Let's remember that a fraction of the *as* was the semis. The semis (in Greek: σεμίσις *semísis*; in Latin: semis, 'half a unit'; plural in Latin: semissis) was a coin issued twice, the first in bronze, worth $\frac{1}{2}$ *as*, and the second, in gold, equivalent to $\frac{1}{2}$ solidus (during the late Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire). During the Roman Republic, the coin had an 'S' (from 'semis') or 6 dots or pellets (the theoretical weight of 6 'unciae'). Since the coinage method was imprecise, the weight also varied. Due to the monetary reforms and economic crises resulting from the Punic Wars (especially from the second to the third, 225-211 BC), its weight changed and fell considerably, and it circulated between 280-86 BC. By 215 BC, its weight was already 35 gr.; and in 211 BC, after the reform of the *as* (which now weighed 54.81 gr.), its weight became between 22-27gr., more or less. Around 169-157 BC, the semis weighed 17gr.

Quadrans

The quadrans (in Latin: 'a quarter'; Greek: kodrantes, κοδράντης) was a low-value Roman bronze coin, equivalent to $\frac{1}{4}$ of *as*. It was minted on bronze coins during the Roman Republic with three small dots or pellets, representing three unciae as a mark of its value (1 'uncia' = $\frac{1}{12}$ of *as*) and were therefore also known as teruncius ('three unciae'). In Mk 12: 42, when the poor widow gave 'two small coins' (in Greek: λεπτά *lepta*; singular: λεπτόν *lepton*) to the Temple treasury, this value represented one quadrans.



Aes Grave – Quadrans – 275–270 BC

currencies of the Greek state. In the Hasmonean Kingdom the lepton was first minted under Alexander Jannaeus before 76 BC.

COMMON COINS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE



Aureus 200 BC- 305 AD
7g; 20 mm



Solidus 310-693 AD
4.5g; 20 mm



AE3 315-400 AD
2-4g; 18 mm



AE4 383-400 AD
0.5-1.5g; 14 mm



Denarius 211 BC-241 AD
3g; 19 mm



Tremissis 380-367 AD
1.5g; 14 mm



Antoninianus 215-295 AD
3.5g; 21 mm



Siliqua 310-650 AD
1-3g; 18 mm



Sestertius 23 BC-250 AD
20-30g; 35 mm



As 280 BC-250 AD
9-12g; 27 mm



Follis 294-310 AD
5-12g; 26 mm (early)



Dupondius 23 BC-250 AD
11-15g; 29 mm

The most commonly used coin denominations
and their relative sizes during Roman times

The two coins you see above with the name AE3 and AE4 are part of a series of bronze coins introduced by Constantine in the mid-4th century and which do not have a specific denomination. For this reason, they were classified according to their size: AE1, AE2, AE3 and AE4, with AE1 having a larger size, 27 mm; and the AE4 is smaller than 15 mm.

AE1	AE2	AE3	AE4
Over 25 mm	21 – 25 mm	17 – 21 mm	Under 17 mm

Siliquea

Siliquea (plural siliquae) is the modern name given to Roman silver coins, small and thin, produced in the 4th century AD and which probably circulated until the 7th century. When coins were in circulation, the Latin word 'siliquea' was a unit, perhaps of a weight defined by one late Roman writer as 1/24 of a Roman solid.



Siliquea (310-650 AD); 1-3g; 18 mm

Miliarenses

As we saw before, Domitian created silver argenteus and folis (a bronze coin with a light silver cover). Later, Constantine created the solid of gold (solidus) and other minor bronze denominations that circulated until the end of the Western Roman Empire. The only silver coin that was regularly minted was Miliarenses (miliarensis, in Latin means: 'pertaining to a thousand') and its weight varied between 3.8 and 6.0 grams, and its thickness varied. In Constantine's time it was approximately 23 mm in diameter. There were two models of a coin: light and heavy. 14 heavy miliarenses and 18 light miliarenses were equal to a solidus. Due to its exquisite execution on both sides it was widely used as a pendant in Ancient times. In the 8th – 12th century Byzantine silver coinage, it received the name of miliaresion.



Roman miliarenses coin of Valentinian I (r. 364-375 AD) showing mint mark TRPS. TR indicates the mint (Treveri – Trier, Germany) and PS indicates the purity of silver. The coin was called 'VIRTUS EXERCITUS' (Virtue of the army.)

Nummus

Nummus (in Latin) is a term meaning ‘coin’, used technically for a series of copper coins issued by the Roman and Byzantine emperors during the Late Antiquity (284–750). Initially, it was the name given to the follis, a large bronze coin weighing 10 gr. and 30 mm in diameter (some numismatists say 5-12gr.; 26 mm). However, in the time of Emperor Constans II (r. 641–668; Heraclian Dynasty), one follis weighed only 3 gr. Thus, the term ‘nummus’ is generally applied exclusively to Byzantine coin issues of the lowest denomination from the 5th to the 7th century (The denomination is an appropriate description of a monetary value, usually for coins or notes).



Nummi coins of the late reign of Anastasius I Dicorus (491 to 518): on the left a 40-nummi coin (follis) and on the right a 5-nummi coin (pentanummium).

Equivalence:

Augustan values (27 BC – AD 301)

1 Aureus = 25 Denarius
1 Aureus = 50 Quinarius
1 Aureus = 100 Sestertius
1 Aureus = 200 Dupondius
1 Aureus = 400 As
1 Aureus = 800 Semis
1 Aureus = 1.600 Quadrans

Diocletian values (301–305)

1 Solidus = 10 Argenteus
1 Solidus = 40 Nummus
1 Solidus = 200 Radiate*
1 Solidus = 500 Laureate
1 Solidus = 1000 Denarius

* Radiate was a Roman coin first issued by Diocletian during his currency reforms of 293–310 AD, and was very similar to the Antoninianus ('Barbarous radiate' of copper). Laureate is not known.

Late Empire coin values (337–476)

1 Solidus = 10 or 14 Miliarenses
1 Solidus = 24 Siliqua
1 Solidus = 180 Follis
1 Solidus = 7200 Nummos

As I said in the beginning, 1 denarius these days corresponds to sixteen cents of dollar (\$ 0.16), and 1 talent, to 960 dollars (\$ 960).

MONEY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- The shekel, the mina and the talent were pieces or bars of metal (silver, gold) used as a way of payment (2 Kin. 18: 14).
- As a coin, the 'drachma' in NIV version (Ezr. 2: 69; Neh. 7: 70), is written in Hebrew as 'darkemon' דַּרְכֶּמוֹן (plural: darkemons or drakmomim: דַּרְכֶּמוֹנִים – Strong #1871), which corresponds to the Greek 'drachma'. In 1 Chr. 29: 7; Ezr. 8: 27, for 'darics' in NIV, it is used the Hebrew word 'adarkon' (אֲדַרְכֹּנִים = adarkonim; Strong #150), which corresponds to the Persian daric. KJV writes 'drams.'
- The piece of silver or 'money' – NRSV (Gen. 33: 19, kesitah – Strong #7192 – קֶשִׁיטָה) is a unit of Money of unknown weight or value.

MONEY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (1 = Basic Unit)

Biblical unit	Origin – type	Biblical correspondent	Proportion
Lepton or mite (Mk. 12: 42 or '2 small coins')	Greek (lepta) or Jewish (mite) coin of copper or bronze	½ kodrante or 1/128 denarius	1/128
Kodrantes (Mk. 12: 42 or two leptas or mites)	Greek coin of bronze Roman (quadrans)	¼ assarion or 1/64 denarius	1/64

Farthing or Assarion *** (Matt. 10: 29; Lk. 12: 6)	Greek coin of copper Roman (assarius)	1/16 denarius	1/16
Denarius Matt. 20: 2	Roman coin of silver	wage for a day's work	1 **
Drachma Lk. 15: 8	Greek coin of silver	Equal to 1 denarius	1
Didrachma (Matt. 17: 24)	Greek coin of silver	2 drachmas or 2 denarius	2
Tetradrachm	Greek coin of silver	4 drachmas or 4 denarius	4
Stater (Matt. 17: 27)	Greek coin of silver	4 drachmas or 4 denarius	4
Mina* or Maneh (Lk. 19: 13)	Greek coin of gold	100 denarius	100
Talent (Matt. 25: 15)	Silver and gold	6000 denarius	6.000

Important notes concerning the table:

* Three month's wages or ½ kilogram of silver

** In Jn. 12: 5 this valuable ointment was worth 300 pence or denarii, which would be the average wage for 300 days of work (almost what an average worker would earn in one year).

*** It is known that during the 1st century, one *as* (Matt. 10: 29; Lk. 12: 6: 'Penny', 'Pennies') bought the equivalent of half a kilogram of bread or one liter of cheap wine or two sparrows (Matt. 10: 29). 'As' was a Roman coin, first of bronze and then, of copper.

- Farthing (KJV) was a Portuguese currency created during the reign of D. Afonso V (1438-1477 and 1477-1481), king of Portugal and Algarves. Its designation comes from the name sextile, that is, a sixth.

- Lepton (Mk. 12: 42) – today (lepto) is 1/100 of all Greek coins

- In Matt. 26: 15 – 'thirty pieces of silver' – the word is not drachma, but 'argurion' (ἀργύριον – Strong # g694), which means 'silver, a piece of silver, a shekel; money in general', especially silvery (i.e., drachma or shekel).

- Source of research: J. D. Douglas – The New Bible Dictionary, 2nd edition 1995; and wikipedia.org.

- Source of research for some images: wikipedia.org.

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