

1.2

Coins Mentioned in the New Testament

Coins: Values and New Testament References		
The denarius or drachma is the standard unit, equal to a typical day's wage.		
talent	6,000 drachmae/denarii	Matt. 18:24; 25:14–30
mina	100 drachmae/denarii	Luke 19:13–26
shekel	4 drachmae/denarii	
stater	4 drachmae/denarii	Matt. 17:27
half-shekel	2 drachmae/denarii	
didrachmon	2 drachmae/denarii	Matt. 17:24
drachma	Greek: a day's wage	Luke 15:8
denarius	Roman: a day's wage	Matt. 18:28; 20:1–16; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Rev. 6:6
assarion	1/10 drachma/denarius	Matt. 10:29
quadrans	1/4 assarion (1/40 drachma/denarius)	Matt. 5:26; Mark 12:42
lepton	1/2 quadrans (1/80 drachma/denarius)	Mark 12:42; Luke 12:59; 21:2

talent: This unit of silver was equal to six thousand Greek drachmae or Roman denarii. One talent was roughly equal to what a typical worker could earn over a sixteen-year period. Jesus tells a parable (Matt. 25:14–30) in which a wealthy man gives his servants different amounts of talents (one, two, five; in the latter case, the amount was more than the servant could hope to earn in a lifetime). In another parable (Matt. 18:23–35), Jesus uses creative exaggeration to stress

the incalculable difference between divine and human mercy: a servant owes his king (God) ten thousand talents (= millions of dollars) but is upset with a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii.

mina (pound): The NRSV uses the word “pound” for a Greek mina, a silver coin worth one hundred drachmae (or denarii). The only New Testament reference comes in a parable told by Jesus in Luke 19:13–26 (the parable of the pounds); another version of the same story appears in Matthew 25:14–30 (the parable of the talents).

denarius: This silver coin was the usual day’s wage for a typical laborer (see Matt. 18:28; 20:1–16; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Rev. 6:6). The denarius (a Roman coin) appears to have been roughly equivalent in value to the drachma (a Greek coin). The “lost coin” in the parable that Jesus tells in Luke 15:8–10 is a drachma.

shekel (pieces of silver): The story of Judas receiving money to betray Jesus uses an imprecise term: the Greek simply says that Judas was paid thirty “silvers” (Matt. 26:15). Most scholars think this referred to thirty shekels. A shekel was a silver Judean coin (i.e., not Roman or Greek, for the priests avoided using coins bearing idolatrous images of Caesar or pagan gods). It was worth about four drachmae (or four denarii).

stater, didrachma (temple tax): The story of the temple tax in Matthew 17:24–27 involves two different Roman coins. The amount

of the annual temple tax was two drachmae (or two denarii) per person.

In Matthew 17:24, the NRSV uses the English expression “temple tax” to translate a reference to a Greek coin called the “didrachma,” a coin that was worth two drachmae. This was the typical coin that an individual used to pay the tax.

In Matthew 17:27, Jesus tells Peter to use the “coin” that he finds in a fish’s mouth to pay the temple tax for both of them. Here, the Greek word translated “coin” in the NRSV is *stater*. A stater was a silver Greek coin worth about four drachmae; thus the single coin could pay the temple tax for two people.

assarion, quadrans, lepta (penny): The NRSV uses the English word *penny* for three different Roman coins:

- An assarion was worth one-tenth of a denarius; this is the amount for which Jesus says two sparrows are sold (Matt. 10:29).
- A quadrans (in Greek, *kodrantēs*) was worth one-fourth of an assarion; this is the amount of the offering that the widow put in the temple treasury in Mark 12:42 (except that she used two coins [see below]; see also Matt. 5:26).
- A leptos was worth one-eighth of an assarion or one-half of a quadrans, the least value of any coin in circulation; the widow

in the temple put “two lepta, which make a quadrans” into the treasury (Mark 12:42).