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Show Me the Money: Pedagogy, Numismatics, and the New Testament

Alexander E. Stewart and Jacob D. Ott
Tyndale Theological Seminary, The Netherlands

Roman imperial and provincial coins are important for understanding religion, politics, and culture in the first century. They are also able to make a unique and valuable pedagogical contribution to classroom teaching in both the academy and the church. In an effort to promote this pedagogical use of ancient coins, this article will (1) provide a brief introduction to biblically relevant coins from the Old Testament, intertestamental, and New Testament periods; (2) briefly illustrate the relevance of numismatics for New Testament studies; and (3) provide practical guidance for the acquisition and pedagogical use of ancient coins.

Key Words: imperial cult, New Testament, numismatics, pedagogy

Biblical scholars familiar with ancient coins regularly lament the lack of integration and inter-disciplinary interaction between numismatics and biblical studies.[1] Those involved with biblical studies are often not convinced that the interpretive value added justifies the time and energy investment necessary to benefit from numismatics or simply do not have the time to even consider exploring this fascinating field. Scholars and teachers of the Bible, however, neglect coins to their loss and the loss of their students for several reasons.[2] (1) First-century coins provide an invaluable window into the religious and political Greco-Roman and Jewish world within which the gospel was first proclaimed.[3] (2) Basic awareness of ancient coins is helpful to properly

[1] Larry J. Kreitzer, *Striking New Images: Roman Imperial Coinage and the New Testament World* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 19; David H. Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts in the World of the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), xviii; Richard E. Oster, "'Show Me a Denarius': Symbolism of Roman Coinage and Christian Beliefs," *ResQ* 28 (1986): 107.

[2] For a more detailed list of ten points, see Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, xix–xx.

[3] Oster concludes that "one could hardly hope to treat the sociological and political ramifications of incipient Christianity in their fullness without noting

interpret many biblical texts (see tables below). (3) Numismatics has proven to be an invaluable source supplementing our understanding of Jewish history, especially from the exile until the Bar Kochba revolt.[4] (4) Coins can make a unique and valuable pedagogical contribution to classroom teaching in both the academy and the church.

The pedagogical value of coins, in particular, is often neglected; coins are valuable teaching aids not just for undergraduate or graduate students but for church members in Bible studies and small groups. Because many ancient coins have survived and are available at a low cost, anyone teaching on the widow's mite (*lepton*), two sparrows being sold for an *as* (*assarion*), Jesus's illustrative use of a denarius, or the pervasive influence of the imperial cult should be able to show students an actual coin. History comes alive for students and teachers when they are able to handle and look at actual coins from the first century.

Judaea, Hasmoneans. *Alexander Jannaeus.*[5] 35–104 BCE. Æ Half-Prutah–Lepton (11mm, 0.94 g, 12h). "Yehohanan the High Priest

the prevailing Roman attitudes which were both nourished and documented by the contemporary coinage" ("'Show Me a Denarius'," 114).

[4] Baruch Kanael, "Ancient Jewish Coins and Their Historical Importance," *Biblical Archeologist* 26 (1963): 37. David Hendin notes, "The coins struck in the ancient land of Israel between the fourth century BCE and the second century CE represent a remarkable and readily available primary source of information about the history, heritage, and emerging culture of Judeo-Christian tradition. Coins witnessed the return of Jews from the Babylonian captivity, the wars of the Hasmoneans with the Seleucids, the building and the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the birth and ascent of Christianity, and the creation of Rabbinic Judaism" (*Guide to Biblical Coins*, 5th ed. [New York: Amphora, 2010], xi).

[5] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

and the Council of the Jews," upright palm branch / Flowering lily between grain ears. Meshorer Group C; Hendin 458.[6]

This is a well-preserved lepton (widow's mite); a very small coin (smaller than a dime). This coin was minted almost 100 years before Jesus was born but the coins were durable and remained in circulation for generations. The paleo Hebrew writing would have been unintelligible to most people but they would have recognized it as Hebrew and understood the nationalistic message of hope, liberation, and restoration to the glories of long ago. The two grain ears also indicate agricultural abundance, a suggestion of restoration and reception of God's covenant blessings.[7] The lily was used in the Temple of Jerusalem as an ornament and was readily understood to be a symbol for Jerusalem.

In an effort to promote this pedagogical use of ancient coins, this article will (1) provide a brief introduction to biblically relevant coins from the Old Testament, intertestamental, and New Testament period; (2) briefly illustrate the relevance of numismatics for NT studies; and (3) provide practical guidance for the acquisition and pedagogical use of ancient coins. This introductory article cannot hope to be exhaustive, but the good news is that one does not need to become an expert or invest weeks of research in order to be able to benefit from the pedagogical potential of numismatics.

Biblical Coins: An Overview

Old Testament Coinage

Coins began being minted in the late seventh century BC in Lydia in Asia Minor and the minting of coins spread rapidly in the ancient world.[8] Hence, most Old Testament history transpired prior to the minting of coins. Even long after the first coins were minted their value

[6] There are different numbering systems in use for Roman Imperial coins, provincial coins, and Judean coins among others. Additionally, there have been updates over time and old RIC (Roman Imperial coin) numbers are different from new RIC numbers. This can become confusing; the best route when learning is just to google the number of a coin you come across to learn more about it. The best websites for this research are http://www.wildwinds.com and https://www.acsearch.info. If possible, of course, you can acquire and consult hard copy catalogues, but this is unnecessary for the beginning collector.

[7] Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 124.

[8] Kanael, "Ancient Jewish Coins," 39.

consisted in their precious metal content. Thus, when money such as the *sheqel* is mentioned in the Old Testament, it is referring to the weight standard of the metal rather than to a specific coin.[9] Transactions in markets would have been made by weighing silver or gold using shekel weights, usually made of limestone. The shekel system was based on a standardized monetary weight unit, as was the *gerah*. Most weights would have been inscribed with the symbol γ for shekel.[10]

Following the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon, the Jews would have been exposed to Persian coins and brought some back with them to Israel. This is confirmed in Ezra 2:69, 8:27 and Neh 5:15; 7:70–72 with reference to *darics* and *sigloi*, Persian coin denominations. However, archeologists have only found a few *darics* and *sigloi* in Israel.[11] There is very little numismatic material for Old Testament studies since coins under the Persians did not begin to be minted in Samaria until 375 to 333 BC and Judah between 400 and 260 BC.[12]

Second Temple Judean Coinage

Judea first began minting coins under the Persians, then under the Macedonians, Ptolemies, and Seleucids. Independent Judean coins did not begin being minted until Antiochus VII gave John Hyrcanus I permission in 132 BC to mint his own small bronze coins. This was during the transition from Seleucid to Hasmonean rule and minting coins was considered a royal prerogative.[13] Hence, the first coins were minted in the name of Antiochus VII by Hyrcanus I presumably in Jerusalem. Hyrcanus had autonomous power in Judea under the oversight of Antiochus VII. Following his death Judea gained its full independence.[14]

The coins minted in the early intertestamental period revealed a strong Hellenistic influence which makes them appear to be Grecian.[15] Many Hasmonean coins continued to use or adopt symbols and images

[9] Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 62–68.

[10] Yigal Ronen, "The Enigma of the Shekel Weights of the Judean Kingdom," *Biblical Archeologist* 59 (1996): 122–25.

[11] Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 19.

[12] Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 101.

[13] Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 161; David Hendin, "Current Viewpoints on Ancient Jewish Coinage: A Bibliographic Essay," *Currents in Biblical Research* 11 (2013): 263.

[14] David M. Jacobson, "The Lily and the Rose: A Review of Some Hasmonean Coin Types," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 76 (2013): 16–17.

[15] Hendin, "Current Viewpoints," 256–60.

common on Greek coins such as the Seleucid inverted anchor and the starburst, a Macedonian royal emblem.[16] The Hasmoneans, however, never minted their portraits on their coins, the common practice of the Greeks. Between the second century BC and first century AD, the Jews abhorred any graven images which they understood to be forbidden in the law's second commandment.[17] The Hasmoneans mostly used a paleo-Hebrew script on their coins even though the vernacular language was Aramaic and paleo-Hebrew had not been used for hundreds of years. The use of paleo-Hebrew was a sign of nationalism and a reminder of "the glorious days of the Israelite period around the time of King David."[18] Thus, the Hasmonean rulers strategically used the inscriptions and iconography on their coins to highlight themes of independence, nationalism, and the promised restoration of covenant blessings.[19]

New Testament Coinage

The New Testament mentions several Roman, Judean, and Greek monetary units and coins. Apart from Rev 6:6, all the explicit references to coins occur in the Gospels. However, the significance of numismatics extends far beyond explicit references to coins (see the next section).[20]

The use of three different monetary systems, Roman, Judean, and Greek, often causes confusion. Tables 1–3 below show the various coin denominations in each system with their biblical references. The Romans brought about a gradual transition from non-Roman to Roman denominations across the Empire but Greek denominations were used alongside Roman denominations even into the third century AD. In Asia and the Eastern Roman Empire, the local and Roman denominations were allowed to co-exist although Augustus began replacing city deities with his own portrait and name on coins throughout the Empire.[21]

[16] Jacobson, "The Lily and the Rose," 21.
[17] Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 172–73.
[18] Hendin, "Current Viewpoints," 267.
[19] Deborah Furlan Taylor, "The Monetary Crisis in Revelation 13:17 and the Provenance of the Book of Revelation," *CBQ* 71 (2009): 589.
[20] Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 31.
[21] Andrew Burnett, "The Augustan Revolution Seen from Mints of the Provinces," *JRS* 101 (2011): 26–28.

Table 1: Roman Coin Denominations and Values (29 BC to AD 194)[22]

Denomination	Value	Biblical Reference
Gold		
Aureus	25 denarii/ 400 Asses	
Half-Aureus	200 Asses	
Silver		
Denarius	16 Asses	Matt 18:28; 20:2, 9–10, 13; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Rev 6:6
Quinarius	8 Asses	
Bronze		
Sesterius	4 Asses	
Dupondius	2 Asses	
As (Assarion)	Basic unit of currency	Matt 10:29; Luke 12:6
Semis	½ As	
Quadrans	¼ As	Matt 5:26; Mark 12:42

Table 2: Judean Coin Denominations and Values (Roman Period)[23]

Denomination	Value	Roman Value	Biblical Reference
Silver			
Shekel	256 Prutot	4 Denarius or 64 Asses	
Half-Shekel	128 Prutot	2 Denarius or 32 Asses	
Bronze			
Prutah	Basic unit of currency	1/64 Denarius or ¼ As	
Lepton	½ Prutah	1/128 Denarius or 1/8 As	Mark 12:42; Luke 12:59; 21:2

[22] Adapted with modifications from Peter Brennan, Michael Turner, and Nicholas L. Wright, *Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins* (Sydney: Nicholson Museum, 2007), 14.
[23] Adapted from Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 22–24, 46.

Table 3: Greek Coin Denominations and Values (Roman Period)[24]				
Denom.	**Value**	**Roman Value**	**Judean Value**	**Biblical Reference**
Gold				
Talent	~180,000 Drachma	~180,000 Denarii	~45,000 Shekels	Matt 18:24; 25:15–16, 20, 22, 24–25, 28[25]
Silver				
Talent	~6,000 Drachma	~6,000 Denarii	~1,500 Shekels	Matt 18:24; 25:15–16, 20, 22, 24–25, 28
Tetradrachma or Stater	4 Drachma	4 Denarii/ 64 Asses	1 Shekel/ 256 Prutot	Matt 17:27
Didrachma	2 Drachma	2 Denarii/ 32 Asses	Half-Shekel/ 128 Prutot	Matt 17:24
Drachma	6 Obols	1 Denarius/ 16 Asses	64 Prutot	Luke 15:8–9
Obol	1/6 Drachma	1/6 Denarius/ 2.67 Asses	10.67 Prutot	
Bronze				
AE units	Various sizes with uncertain relation-ships to other coins			

The first Jewish ruler to mint a coin portraying a graven image was Herod I (the Great), although only one out of his twenty-two coin types has it. Apart from Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefects and procurators placed in charge of Judea minted coins that did not depict anything

[24] Adapted with modifications from Brennan, Turner, and Wright, *Faces of Power*, 14; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 61–63.

[25] These parables do not specify whether the talents were of gold or silver, which, if specified, would not change the meaning.

offensive to the Jews.[26] This religious and political sensitivity was not exercised by everyone: "Herod's son Philip and grandson Agrippa I and great-grandson Agrippa II all issued coins covered with imagery of humans and Greco-Roman gods—including their own portraits."[27] Jewish leaders of the first Jewish revolt (AD 66–70) put an end to this with coins proclaiming "Jerusalem the holy" and "The Freedom of Zion."[28]

Judaea. First Jewish War.[29] AD 66–70. Shekel (22mm, 13.94 g, 12h). Dated year 2 (AD 67/8). "Shekel of Israel," Omer cup with pearled rim; date above / "Jerusalem the Holy," sprig of three pomegranates. Meshorer 193; AJC II 8; Hendin 659; Kadman 7.

The Jewish zealots and revolutionaries sought to present their actions as religiously motivated. During the second year of the conflict they proclaimed the holiness of Jerusalem with this coin; the scripts again utilize paleo-Hebrew to communicate Jewish nationalism and the rejection of corrupting Hellenistic influences.

Redaction criticism is important to the study of coins mentioned in the Gospels. For example, Matt 5:25–26 calls the coin a quadrans and Luke 12:57–59 calls it a lepton. So which type of coin was it and does it matter? Each Gospel author uses the smallest denomination within different monetary systems: the smallest Judean coin is the lepton and the smallest Roman coin is the quadrans (about twice as valuable as a lepton). This would suggest that the Gospel authors were not as concerned with monetary systems as with preserving the meaning of

[26] Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 172–76, 242, 317.

[27] Hendin, "Current Viewpoints," 263.

[28] Hendin, "Current Viewpoints," 263.

[29] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

Christ's message and communicating it to their target audiences. This does sometimes produce difficulty in determining the exact coin that would actually have been handled or discussed by Jesus.[30]

The Value of Numismatics for New Testament Studies

Illustrating History

The connection to a history long past is made real when an artifact from that era is in one's hand. Coins can physically "bridge the 2000-year gap between the New Testament age and our own."[31] Holding a lepton (the widow's mite) and feeling its small size and weight while studying Mark 12:41–44 or Luke 21:1–4 makes the passage come alive for students and teachers alike. Likewise, holding a tribute penny and contemplating Jesus's words in Mark 12:13–17 makes one wonder if perhaps Jesus himself held that very coin. Coins illustrate history by bringing it to life before our very own eyes.[32] This tactile and concrete engagement with history is often able to inspire and ignite historical interest and imagination in students who may not otherwise be engaged in the topic.

Tiberius.[33] AD 14–37. AR Denarius (3.76 gm). TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS, laureate head right / PONTIF MAXIM, Livia as Pax seated right holding olive branch and long scepter; ornate legs to chair. RIC I 30; BMCRE 48; RSC 16a.

[30] Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 32–33. Taylor argues that the denarius itself was relatively unused in Palestine in the early first century and the main references to it in the Gospels reflect its correspondence in value to the local currency ("The Monetary Crisis in Revelation 13:17," 582–87).

[31] Kreitzer, *Striking New Images*, 17.

[32] Kreitzer, *Striking New Images*, 17–20.

[33] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

This Denarius is normally identified as the "tribute penny" discussed by Jesus. On the top of the obverse, Tiberius claims to be the son of the divine Augustus (DIVI AVG F) while on the back he stresses the fact that he is the greatest priest (PONTIF MAXIM). The reverse also features his mother, Livia, posing as if she were the goddess Peace (Pax). This associates the whole imperial family with the divine realm and presents the imperial family as those who bring and ensure peace. All of this was being proclaimed by this common coin around the same time that the Highest Priest, Prince of Peace, and only Son of God was walking the earth.

Apologetic Value

The existence of coins from the biblical era makes an apologetic contribution. Although coins themselves do not prove any major doctrines, they do support the historical reliability of the New Testament in regard to the chronology of rulers (Herod the Great, Pontus Pilate, Agrippa, Festus, Felix, etc.) and the extent of their power.[34] Tertullian, in his apologetic work, referenced not only literature and philosophy but also archaeological evidence from monuments, geographical locations, and coins.[35]

Coins as Primary Sources

There are a very limited number of primary sources available to us for New Testament Studies.[36] In contrast, there is a wealth of information communicated by coins that can shed light on the historical background and context of the New Testament. Coins are an invaluable source for understanding "ancient economics, art, political science, history of religions, and general history."[37] This valuable perspective, although admittedly one-sided and coming from those in power, helps us understand more about how ancient people thought and lived. Despite the fact that coins are much more limited in their ability to communicate complex political, social, and religious dynamics than literary sources, Wenkel cogently argues that they are cultural texts which

[34] Kanael, "Ancient Jewish Coins," 39.

[35] Mark S. Burrows, "Christianity in the Roman Forum: Tertullian and the Apologetic Use of History," *VC* 42 (1988): 220.

[36] Richard Oster, "Numismatic Windows into the Social World of Early Christianity: A Methodological Inquiry," *JBL* 10 (1982): 220.

[37] Oster, "Numismatic Windows," 195.

sought to communicate something to someone.[38] This communicative intent greatly supplements our historical, geographical, cultural, religious, and chronological understanding of the time period. Literature often focuses on short periods of time while coins were consistently minted and have a much better survival rate than literature.[39] The next two sections will further illustrate how coins as primary source material expand our understanding of life in the first century.

Understanding the First-Century World: Imperial Propaganda, Power, and Religion

Roman imperial and provincial coins are a great source for determining what religious life was like in the era of the New Testament.[40] The first-century world was deeply religious, and coins give us insight into the close connection of worship to politics and power.[41] Coins are but one expression of the extensive use of statues and images to impress upon people the reality, power, and presence of the emperor and deities. The beast of Revelation 13 with blasphemous names on its heads and which utters blasphemous things (Rev 13:1, 5) would have likely caused the original hearers to think of Roman Imperial coinage which generally featured the emperor's head surrounded, from a Christian perspective, by blasphemous claims.

Typical imperial coinage in the first century AD featured an image

[38] Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 6–7. Wenkel rightly applies speech-act theory to numismatics in order to draw attention to the intended meaning of communication behind coin production and distribution (pp. 47, 79). There was a clearly intended purpose and desired communication involved in minting coins.

[39] Christopher Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1997), 39.

[40] Oster, "Numismatic Windows," 199.

[41] We are aware that our modern use of the terms "religion" or "religious" do not readily correspond to ancient worship, rituals, and practices but use these terms out of convenience and the lack of good alternative expressions. Ittai Gradel argues, "Pre-Christian *religio* was not concerned with inward, personal virtues, such as belief, but with outward behaviour and attitude; in other words, with observance rather than faith, and with action rather than feeling" (*Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 4). In a similar way, Wenkel notes, "Roman religion must be understood as an institution of objectivity and social cohesion, rather than contemporary (modern-day) subjective spirituality" (*Coins as Cultural Texts*, 152).

of the emperor or a family member on the obverse (front) with a picture of a deity or some image communicating accomplishment or power on the reverse. Imperial inscriptions were in Latin while provincial coins generally utilized Greek inscriptions.

Inscriptions on Imperial Roman coinage commonly feature the following abbreviations.[42] Several of these abbreviations describe positions which would have been held by different people for limited periods of time during the republic but were consolidated by the emperors in the first century.

Table 4: Common Latin Abbreviations on Roman Imperial Coinage[43]

SC	"Senatus Consulto": SC was stamped on almost all Roman Imperial bronze coinage as a guarantee from the senate of the value of the coin since its value in metal was less than its purported value. Governments do this today because the intrinsic value of a dollar bill as paper is nothing—the government assures us that it is worth what it claims to be worth.
IMP	"Imperator": This was originally a generic title for Roman commanders but by the time of Vespasian was firmly associated with the emperor, the supreme power.

[42] Even for the illiterate, these inscriptions served as a symbolic means of communication. Jewish coins minted with paleo-Hebrew inscriptions provide a good example. Even though Aramaic was the widespread language, an illiterate Jew presumably could recognize that Hebrew rather than Greek or Latin was portrayed on the coin. The language or script used was never neutral and there was always a clear (usually political) intention behind it. See Anne Lykke, "The Use of Language and Scripts in Ancient Jewish Coinage: An Aid in Defining the Role of the Jewish Temple Until Its Destruction in 70CE," in *Judaea and Rome in Coins 65 BCE – 135 CE: Papers Presented at the International Conference Hosted by Spink, 13th–14th September 2010*, ed. David M. Jacobson and Nikos Kokkinos (London: Spink, 2012), 27.

[43] This table is drawn and adapted from Doug Smith, "Abbreviations on Roman Imperial Coins," https://www.forumancientcoins.com/dougsmith/abb.html. It is adapted by consultation of Hornblower and Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

CAES, CAE, C	"Caesar": This is the family name of the first emperors and stresses their relationship to Julius Caesar. Later emperors used this title even though they were not directly related.
AVG	"Augustus": Revered, worthy of veneration. Although originally a religious title, this became "the imperial title *par excellence*."[44]
PM, Pont Max	"Pontifix Maximus": This means "high priest" and indicates that the emperor was head of the state religion.
TRP, TRIB POT, P	"Tribunicia Potestas": "Tribunician power." This significant power was wielded by the Tribune of the Plebs.
COS, CONS, CO, C	"Consul": This was the highest office during the time of the Republic and the office remained important under the Empire.
PP	"Pater Patriae": "Father of the Fatherland."
DIV, DV, DIVO, DIVI	"Divine": On Roman Imperial coinage this was reserved for consecrated deceased rulers, but provincial coinage is not as restrained in attributing deity to living rulers.[45]

Coins found their most important uses in the payment of soldiers and trade, but for those in power, they were also the most effective means of mass communication available at the time.[46] Coins would be

[44] Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 219.

[45] James B. Rives notes, "Among Roman citizens and in official contexts, Roman authorities made some attempt to maintain a distinction between deceased and deified emperors, who were worshipped as gods, and the living emperor, who was not; only tyrannical emperors like Caligula and Commodus demanded that they be treated as gods while alive" (*Religion in the Roman Empire* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2007], 152). Cf. Larry Kreitzer, "Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 53 (1990): 211–17. On Caligula's excess, see Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, 140–61; Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Abuse of Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 202.

[46] The wide-spread distribution of coins throughout the Empire were an effective means of propagating their imperial theology and propaganda. See David M. May, "The Empire Strikes Back: The Mark of the Beast in Revelation," *RevExp 106* (2009): 85–86.

seen and handled by many people in the inhabited world and although they did not provide much space to communicate, the first-century emperors put that space to good use with images and inscriptions proclaiming their identity, accomplishments, and power.[47] Coins also served as a means of communicating news and political developments. Kreitzer relates how coins were used in a way similar to modern day "postage stamps or press releases on the radio or TV."[48] Coins provide the government the opportunity to make a statement and send a message with the intent of altering public opinion.[49]

Temples and statues of deities inundated the world of the first century. Although Paul would have been accustomed to seeing idols from his earlier travels, Luke notes that he was particularly troubled by how many idols filled Athens (κατείδωλον οὖσαν τὴν πόλιν; Acts 17:16). Athens, although to a greater extent than other cities, illustrates the pervasiveness of statues, idols, and images that would have characterized any city in the empire. Statues represent and, to some extent, extend the viewer's perception of the presence of the deity. Coins functioned in a similar way. They made the image of the emperor almost omnipresent.[50] "Coins, like statues, give a physical face to power, sometimes realistic, sometimes idealized, not only of emperors, but also of those whose faces on coins show their importance in the physiognomy of power."[51] The emperors were aware that their public image was essential to their maintenance of control and power. Minting coins was a means to proclaiming and publicizing their accomplishments and most importantly putting a face to their wealth.

The Roman government wanted to portray the Empire as a unified peaceful body that ensured prosperity and success. At times coins seem to have been minted as propaganda to cover-up "civil war, economic crisis, or tyrannical rule."[52] Vespasian provides a good example of this. Just after he had been acknowledged as emperor, the Empire was under

[47] Christopher Howgego argues that minting coins allowed a civil authority to define their "public/official/communal identities, principally civic in nature" ("Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces," in *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*, ed. Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and Andrew Burnett [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 1).

[48] Kreitzer, *Striking New Images*, 22.

[49] Kreitzer, *Striking New Images*, 22.

[50] Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 152.

[51] Brennan, "Faces of Power," 7.

[52] Brennan, "Faces of Power," 7.

attack along the Rhine and Danube. With such a volatile situation, the news of Titus having captured Jerusalem and suppressed the Jewish rebellion in AD 70 came just in time. Vespasian made the most of this news and had a series of Judaea Capta coins minted.[53] These coins were an extraordinary piece of propaganda, which communicated his power, ability to bring victory, and imperial ideology. The defeat of Jerusalem occurred almost precisely one hundred years after Antony was defeated by Octavian and this was considered to be a divine sign which was used to further support the Flavians as legitimate rulers and emperors.[54] Coinage often portrays the emperor as militarily victorious through the help of Nike, the god of victory. Military victory indicated divine favor.[55] Thus, the Judaea Capta coins do not only serve to elevate Rome and the emperor but also humiliate the Judaeans and their weak God who did not save them.[56]

Vespasian.[57] AD 69–79. AE Sestertius (31mm, 24.13 gm). Rome mint. "Judaea Capta" issue, struck AD 71. IMP CAES VESPASIAN AVG P M TR P COS III, laureate head right / IVDAEA CAPTA, SC in exergue, mourning Judaea seated before palm, Jewish man standing right with hands bound behind back, arms around. RIC II 424; Hendin 773; Cohen 234.

This example proclaims Rome's victory over the rebellious Jews, and by extension, their god. The image on the reverse exudes pathos. The captive man is bound and the woman is slumped forward in a position of mourning. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem for Judaism and early Christianity.

[53] Philip F. Esler, "God's Honour and Rome's Triumph: Response to the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE in three Jewish Apocalypses," in *Modeling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context*, ed. Philip Esler (London: Routledge, 1995), 241.

[54] Esler, "God's Honour and Rome's Triumph," 246.

[55] Brennan, "Faces of Power," 7.

[56] Esler, "God's Honour and Rome's Triumph," 242–43, 246.

[57] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

Coins from their beginning were bound up with the religion of the land. From Persian coins to Greek city coins and the earliest Roman coins, gods (Zeus, Mars, Athena, Apollo, Roma, Hercules, etc.), religious symbols (thunderbolt, eagle, tripod, etc.) and mythical divine ancestors adorned coins.[58] Although the eastern provincial coins mostly depicted local deities, they at times incorporated elements of the emperors and external power to signify their unity with the Empire.[59] "The sense of 'belonging' to the Roman state, a multi-cultural empire unified by political authority, central administration, and military power" is expressed clearly in provincial coins.[60] Provincial coins indicate that as the first century progressed the provinces increasingly incorporated the emperor into their religious world and acknowledged his "unrivalled superhuman power."[61]

Macedon, Amphipolis. *Augustus.*[62] 27 BC–AD 14. (22mm, 9.68 g, 12h). Bare head right / Artemis Tauropolos right. RPC I 1626; SNG

[58] Jonathan Williams, "Religion and Roman Coins," in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 143–44.

[59] Howgego, "Coinage and Identity," 2–3.

[60] Sophia Kremydi-Sicilianou, "'Belonging' to Rome, 'Remaining' Greek: Coinage and Identity in Roman Macedonia," in *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*, ed. Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and Andrew Burnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101.

[61] Volker Heuchert, "The Chronological Development of Roman Provincial Coin Iconography," in *Coinage and Identity in the Roman Provinces*, ed. Christopher Howgego, Volker Heuchert, and Andrew Burnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 44.

[62] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

ANS 164.

This is a provincial coin from Amphipolis (a little North West of Asia Minor) during the reign of Augustus (31 BC–AD 14). On the right side of the obverse you can make out KAISAR (Caesar) and on the left of the obverse you can see the first of two words: ΘEOY [YIOS] (son of god). The reverse is an image of the goddess Artemis riding a bull with the name of the city (Amphipolis). The coin demonstrates allegiance to Rome by proclaiming Augustus to be the son of god while still celebrating local religious beliefs by highlighting Artemis on the reverse.

Coinage was often used in antiquity to establish a public identity, and the most predominant way of accomplishing that was through religious expression. With the polytheistic religion of Greece and Rome, some cities were permitted to mint coins depicting their local ancestral gods. However, coins only represented the majority religion and not the minority religions, such as Judaism or Christianity. Therefore, numismatics provides practically no evidence of the spread of early Christianity.[63]

Various deities featured on ancient coins include, but are not limited to, Zeus/Jupiter, Ares/Mars, Felicitas/Fortuna (goddesses of luck), Hera/Juno, Nike/Victory (winged goddess of victory), Apollo, Helios/Sol, Artemis/Diana, Aphrodite/Venus (goddess of love), Spes/Elpis (goddess of hope), Athena/Minerva, Aequitas/Justitia (goddesses of justice and fairness), Libertas (god of liberty), Pietas (god of piety), Demeter/Ceres/Annona (harvest deities), Asclepius, Hygeia, and Telesphorus (deities of medicine and health), Salus (goddess of health/salvation), Pax (goddess of peace), and Roma (a goddess personifying the city of Rome and the Roman state).

In addition, Roman coins depict several different religious images: sacrificial vessels, altars, temples, monuments, and objects of Roman religious practices. Temples and altars are the most commonly portrayed. The emperors minted such images to boast of their piety, devotion, and generosity expressed in building temples to the gods. These symbols also served as a way of evoking emotions of Roman loyalty, unity, and "their communities' unique relationship with the gods."[64]

Understanding the First-Century World: Emperor Worship

The image of the emperor on coins functioned, similar to the images of deities, to proclaim and project the emperor's presence and power throughout his empire.[65] Every monetary transaction in the first-century Mediterranean world took place under the watchful gaze of the emperor through his image. He was everywhere and he was in charge. The near omnipresence of the emperor through his image continually reminded the subjects of the empire who held ultimate power.

The pairing of the image of the emperor on the obverse with an image of a deity on the reverse impressed upon every person in the empire that the emperor was associated with the divine realm: "Caesar had one foot in this world and one foot in the realm of the Greco-Roman pantheon."[66] The emperor, even though not officially deified until after death, was in company and association with gods and goddesses. This close association of the emperor with the divine realm further suggested his power and authority.

The Greeks had been deifying their kings and rulers, since at least the reign of Alexander the Great (336–323 BC), often giving them a divine status. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV (175–163 BC) sought out and endorsed his own divinity, which paved the way for the Maccabean Revolt and a short period of relative Jewish independence.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes.[67] 175–164 BC. AR Tetradrachm (30mm, 16.13 g). Antioch mint. Dated SE 167 (146/5 BC; posthumous). Diademed head of Antiochos IV right / Zeus seated left, holding Nike and scepter.

If you have studied Greek you will be able to clearly read BASILEŌS ANTIOCHES EPIPHANES (King Antioches [god] manifest/revealed). The image on the reverse shows Zeus holding the winged goddess Nike (victory) in his hand. Antioches IV famously desecrated the Jerusalem temple and claimed to be God manifest (epiphanes). He is linked by ancient Jewish sources with Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of desolation.

[63] Howgego, "Coinage and Identity," 2.
[64] Williams, "Religion and Roman Coins," 146–48.
[65] Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 152–54.
[66] Wenkel, *Coins as Cultural Texts*, 150.
[67] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

Although the Roman West initially frowned upon this, deification of rulers was a common practice among the Greek world. Eventually, however, the influence of the East made its way to Rome. Octavius, later called Augustus, saw an opportunity to solidify his power against Mark Antony by declaring his father divine and minting "a series of coins proclaiming his position as son of the Divine Caesar."[68]

The emperor was considered to "be present in the world like one of the traditional gods."[69] However, the emperor was not considered on par with the gods even though he held a position higher than mere men.[70] He was viewed as having the god's special favor and was a means by which the gods blessed humanity.[71] Additionally, the emperor functioned as the Roman high priest, *pontifex maximus*, and was venerated and understood to be a "mediator between the gods and the human race."[72]

Critics of Christianity have argued that the deification of the emperor influenced or became a model for the Christians' deification of Jesus Christ. The Jews and Christians would have been aware of the deification of Caesar and Augustus, yet there are significant differences. The monotheistic God of the Jews and Christians is the one and only supreme being. Christ is the incarnation of God, his coming down from heaven to earth. While the deification of the emperor was a movement "of a man from earth to heaven."[73] The emperor's blasphemous claims of power and divinity would have been abhorrent to the Jews and Christians. These claims stood in direct opposition to the Christian proclamation of Jesus as God's only Son.

As noted above, the emperors regularly sought to promote themselves by association with various gods such as Nike (Victory), Salus (Salvation/Health), Pax (Peace), and Spes (Hope).[74]

[68] Kreitzer, *Striking New Images*, 80–84.

[69] S. R. F. Price, "Gods and Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult," *JHS* 104 (1984): 87.

[70] Price, "Gods and Emperors," 87–88.

[71] Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 152.

[72] David A. deSilva, "Ruler Cult," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background,* ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1027.

[73] Kreitzer, *Striking New Images*, 97–98.

[74] Brennan, "Faces of Power," 8–9.

Nero.[75] AD 54–68. Dupondius (30mm, 15.90 g, 7h). Struck circa AD 66. Countermarked under Vespasian in northeast Gaul, circa AD 69. IMP NERO CAESAR AVG P MAX TR POT P P P, laureate head right; globe at point of bust / VICTORIA AVGVSTI, Victory advancing left, holding wreath in outstretched right hand and palm frond over left shoulder; S C flanking. RIC I 522; WCN 524; Lyon 204; BMCRE 353–5; BN 144–5.

Victory (νικάω, νίκη) is an important theme in the New Testament and a very common feature of Roman imperial coinage. The winged goddess features prominently on many coins. The obverse of this coin proclaims, among other things that Nero is the greatest priest (P MAX) and the father of his country (PP). The reverse clearly connects victory with the emperor (VICTORIA AUGUSTI). This coin was struck around the same time that Peter and Paul were put to death by Nero in Rome. The countermark on the front relates to the reuse of the coin by Vespasian to pay soldiers. He did not want to pay with money from Nero (a disgraced former emperor) without marking it with his seal.

Nero.[76] AD 54–68. Denarius (3.46 gm). Struck AD 65–66. NERO

[75] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

[76] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

CAESAR AVGVSTVS, laureate head right / SALVS, Salus seated left on throne, holding patera. RIC I 60; BMCRE 90; RSC 314.

Even as the authors of the New Testament proclaimed salvation through Jesus, the Roman emperor presented himself as the source of salvation (Salus). This was likewise minted right around the time Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome.

Vespasian.[77] AD 69–79. Sestertius (33mm, 25.15 g, 5h). Rome mint. Struck AD 71. IMP CAES VESPAS AVG PM TR P P P COS III, laureate head right / PAX AVGVSTA, Pax standing left, holding olive branch and cornucopia; S C flanking. RIC II 243.

The emperor also often proclaimed his ability to bring peace (pax) by connecting himself with the goddess Pax, the personification of peace. Vespasian minted this shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. On the reverse he proclaims himself to be the one who brings and maintains peace in the world (PAX AUGUSTI). Coins like this connected the imperial cult with peace throughout the Empire; this is related to the well-known Pax Romana. Ironically, it was the Pax Romana that served to bring the peace of Christ to the Empire.[78]

[77] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

[78] J. E. Bowley, "Pax Romana," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 774.

Claudius.[79] AD 41–54. Sestertius (35mm, 28.72 gm, 6h). Rome mint. TI. CLAVDIVS. CAESAR. AVG. P. M. TR. P. IMP. P. P., laureate head right / SPES AVGVSTA, Spes advancing left, holding flower aloft and lifting hem of skirt; S.C in exergue. RIC I 115; BMCRE 192; Cohen 85.

Claudius reigned during the early part of Paul's ministry and writing. With this coin Claudius proclaims that hope (Spes) is found with the emperor; a claim which directly opposed Paul's teaching that hope can only be found in the Messiah. The goddess Spes is pictured holding a flower; imagery well suited to inspire hope.

The messages portrayed on Roman coins are in clear opposition to the Christian message. Who has ultimate power? Who is truly victorious? Who can provide peace? Who can bring us hope? Who cares for our physical needs? Who is our mediator to god? Early Christian claims about Jesus stand in stark contrast to contemporary claims made by and about the emperor.

Starting a Pedagogical Coin Collection

Because of the durable materials and vast quantity of coins minted in the ancient world, many coins have survived to the present day. The quality of these coins varies greatly. Rare and well-preserved coins can often cost as much as $5,000 to $10,000 but more common coins with reasonable portraits and inscriptions can easily be acquired for $50.00 to $100.00.

Fakes, forgeries, and replicas circulate and are sometimes sold (whether intentionally or unintentionally) as if they were genuine so

[79] Photo and technical description courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (https://cngcoins.com).

careful research is needed.[80] You will not have the knowledge or ability at the beginning stage to personally determine the genuineness of a coin so the most important guideline is to *research and know the seller*. Specialized auction houses and individual collectors invest their entire lives and careers in developing reputations for only selling genuine coins. These sellers can be reasonably trusted to only sell legitimate ancient coins because their business and reputation depends upon it. Legitimate and trusted sellers will not knowingly pass on a fake coin. This is not fool-proof since some forgeries are capable of fooling experienced numismaticians, but it is a reliable guide for beginning collectors. Sometimes the provenance of a coin can be traced to a particular famous collection or to past sales at auction houses, but this historical trail is often non-existent for lower quality coins for collectors on a budget.

Several websites will prove valuable to the beginning collector.[81] First, Forum Ancient Coins (www.forumancientcoins.com) is an active online hub with forum posts about ancient coins by both experienced and new collectors. In addition, the site hosts a multitude of resources and information as well as hosting a consignment store and auction. VCoins (www.vcoins.com) is a fixed price and auction online marketplace with over one hundred coin dealers from around the world. Finally, NumisBids (www.numisbids.com) allows a user to easily and quickly search the catalogues of established global auction houses. Another option, of course, is Ebay (ebay.com). Many legitimate sellers list coins on Ebay and it is a good location to acquire inexpensive and low-quality coins, but Ebay is also responsible for the circulation of a large number of fakes. With Ebay in particular, it is necessary to carefully research the seller. Sellers listing on Ebay with an established business and reputation outside of Ebay will generally be more reliable.

The websites mentioned above will enable a beginning collector to acquire some initial coins while continuing to learn more about ancient coins. The next step is to think through what coins to try to acquire. Two obvious coins come to mind: the widow's mite (a lepton) mentioned in Mark 12:42; Luke 12:59; 21:2 and a denarius from the reign of Augustus or Tiberius mentioned in Jesus's dispute with the Pharisees

[80] David Hendin, *Not Kosher: Forgeries of Ancient Jewish and Biblical Coins* (New York: Amphora, 2005). The Forum Ancient Coins maintains up-to-date lists of online sellers of fake coins, photo galleries of fake coins, and competent daily discussions of possible fake coins: https://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php?board=9.0.

[81] The authors certify that they have no personal or financial interest and no present or past employment with any of the companies or websites discussed in this article.

and Herodians in Matt 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:19–26. The lepton is the smallest coin minted in Palestine. Because of its low value (half a prutah) it was often carelessly minted and widely circulated; most surviving examples are very worn. Also, because weights were not standardized or carefully followed, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a lepton and a worn prutah. Because of this, some sellers will market a worn prutah as a widow's mite. The denarius shown to Jesus in his famous discussion about taxes is often linked to a denarius with Tiberius's portrait, but it is also possible that it was an older one with the portrait of Augustus.

In addition to these specific coin types, a collection can be built around various themes. One could try to build a collection of each Roman emperor in the first century (Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Nerva, Trajan), of Herodian coins (Herod the Great, Archelaus, Antipas, Agrippa I, Agrippa II), of important Roman procurators in Palestine (Valerius Gratus [AD 15–26], Pontius Pilate [AD 26–36], Marcus Antonius Felix [AD 52–60], Porcius Festus [AD 60–62]), of the Hasmonean rulers, of the Jewish revolt in 66–70 AD, of the Judaea Capta coins minted following the revolt to celebrate Rome's victory and Jewish humiliation, of coins related to emperor and empire worship, of coins with religious concepts and deities which paralleled the Christian proclamation (Pax, Salus, Dik, Nike, Spes), of the various cities mentioned in Acts or the book of Revelation, of Seleucid, Ptolemaic, or Parthian rulers associated with particular events (such as Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the abomination of desolation in 167 BC), or coins illustrating various background issues (a modius full of grain proclaiming the emperor's ability to prevent famine in contrast to the famine prophesied in Rev 6:5–6 or images of the sphinx or chimera to illustrate the kind of mythical beast that many first-century readers would have thought of based on the description in Rev 9:7–10). Pedagogically, a comprehensive collection is less important than having coins to illustrate various topics discussed often in the classroom such as emperor worship or the destruction of Jerusalem. The research and teaching interests of the individual teacher will guide the acquisition of particular coins. Lower quality examples of any of the coins featured in this article can be acquired at a reasonable cost but various details and features will likely be worn or missing.

Conclusion

This article has provided a brief introduction to ancient coins relevant to biblical studies, discussed the relevance of numismatics for New Testament studies, and provided practical guidance for the acquisition and pedagogical use of ancient coins. It is hoped that this brief introduction will help increase the pedagogical use of coins in classrooms and Bible studies, and by extension, the further integration of numismatics into traditional biblical studies.