Roman coins in the Gospels and their significance, or Bringing the Gospels up to date --- through coins.

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Introduction.

We see inflation everywhere, but because it is a particularly present problem we tend to ignore its effects in published commentaries. This means that early translations of the Gospels have an unfortunate effect on our picture of the time of Jesus. In the earliest translations it was reasonable, if a little 'antiquarian', to equate the Roman denarius often mentioned in the Gospels with the silver penny. But that has stuck so that the sermon or homily can seriously suggest that the value of the coin remains 1p. Brave commentators realise that things need to be brought up to date and have suggested slightly higher values but it is safer to leave it as day's wage. If something more exact is needed then we should pay people the proper (exploitative) rate of at least £5 an hour with an eight-hour day, and so the denarius ought, in 2024, to be given a notional value of around £40. Inserted into the texts this would shock congregations: When the Good Samaritan moved on he left £80 to pay for two days shelter for the victim. Ridiculous? Board and lodging at a country Inn for £40 a day? Not cheap, but reasonable.

If we move from modern polemic to ancient evidence, is it really reasonable?

The sources and their information.

As often with questions and problems in the ancient world there are two possible sources of evidence that can be interrogated - written texts and archaeological finds. While applicable written sources are rare they also have the additional problem of being written by an individual or group for specific purposes and often specific audiences. Archaeological finds are much more widespread and the problem with them is to fix the human context and date to which their deposition belongs. Since we are dealing with coins whose issuing authority and date of issue are quite often well known, this might seem to be no problem at all. But that is an illusion because the date in question is not that at which the coin was minted but the date at which it was deposited. In the present state of archaeological publication that is seldom possible -- an excellent exception being that of D T Ariel in Ben-Ami 2013 -- because coins are usually given in a simple list with no indications of exact find-spots and even more rarely, likely dates of deposits in which they were found. While these warnings may seem severe they can to some extent be overcome in the present enquiry partly because there is a relevant written source in the Gospels though this might turn out to have its own problems.

Written sources on coin use and coin loss are very rare in the Roman world and two examples stand out - these are the Satyricon written in Rome by Petronius c.AD 60 (Sat.) and the

references to coins in the New Testament. This is not a matter of choosing the Gospels from a range of possibilities, but a matter of using the only sources that exist. Since the Satyricon is set in middle-class life in Italy in the first century AD it is hardly surprising that the coins mentioned relate well to the Roman coinage system of the time from the gold Aureus, to the silver Denarius, and down to the bronze and copper Sestertius, Dupondius, As, and its subdivisions of Semis and Quadrans. But since the text is a scathing upper-class review of middle and lower class habits the emphasis is on disparagement of lower value coins and their users and approval of gold and silver. So a slave in the atrium of the house of the chief character sits counting out gold pieces from a sack (Sat.30) while the only mention of the smallest coin, the Quadrans, is that some people are so mean that they would pick a Quadrans out of a muck-heap with their teeth (Sat.43). In the same way the talk at the banquet deals with people who 'started out from an As and made good' (Sat.43) or reflect that 'no one is worth a Dupondius'(Sat.58).

This is in complete contrast to the references and attitudes to coins in the Gospels. The only time gold is mentioned (Matt 10.9) it is to say that no money should be taken by the disciples on a journey - not gold or silver or bronze. Silver is mentioned more often as in the 30 pieces of silver given to Judas for the betrayal (Matt 26,15), the Stater that turned up in the mouth of the fish for paying the taxes (Matt 17.27) or the Argyrion, silver piece, for the cost of magic books burned (Acts 19.1.9 -- in Latin denarii). The silver Denarius is the most commonly mentioned coin with 12 uniform mentions in both Greek and Latin texts (see appendix 2). Carrying on down the list of values there is the silver Didrachma for the payment of taxes (Matt 17.24) and the Drachma lost by the woman in her house (Luke 15.8).

In the lower value coins there is less uniformity. The Sestertius is nowhere mentioned. The Dupondius - half Sestertius - appears as a Dipondius (Luke 12.6), and, half value again, the As has only two mentions (Luke 12.6 and Malt 10.29). The half As or Semis has no mention, but the Quadrans, the quarter As, appears as the smallest amount of a debt that could possibly be claimed (Matt 5.26) and the sum total of the poor widow's donation (Mark 12.42). This last reference is particularly interesting because Mark explains that while the rich threw money into the temple treasury the poor widow put in all that she had left which was two of the very smallest coins - two Lepta (Minuta in Latin) 'which make a Quadrans'. It is usually assumed that Mark was writing his gospel for a foreign (non-Palestinian) audience, perhaps even in Rome and his explanation of the Minutum was necessary because mention of the widow's two Lepta would have meant nothing to a western, Latin speaking, audience. The denomination did not exist in the West and there was no coin of similar small value.

Dupondii and Asses also cause the writers a little difficulty, apart from the uncertainty of the price of sparrow-like small birds. Matthew (10,29) says that two are sold for an As while Luke (12,6) makes a special offer of five for a Dupondius (Latin) or two Assaria (Greek). The total absence of the Sestertius and the Semis, the few mentions of the As and the Dupondius, together with the need to translate the Lepton into a Minutum and then explain that two of them make a Quadrans could reasonably be taken to suggest that the gospel writers were not very familiar with Roman bronze and copper coins. It seems very likely that the original sayings were remembered in terms of other local small bronze coins that were in common use in Palestine, and Romanised for wider comprehension. But this is to stray from the written sources to the archaeological finds. Before these can be considered in detail they need to be set in context of the expanding Roman Empire and its components.

Two vital components of the empire which in fact interlocked were the taxation system and the army. Both are mentioned several times in the gospels and need to be taken into account when coins of Roman denominations are discussed. Inhabitants of the empire had to pay taxes and a substantial portion of those taxes went to pay and support the army for the protection of both

individuals and the state. In turn the state paid the army regularly and this was necessary to secure their allegiance. There was clearly a unit of the army in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus as the Gospels confirm and the inhabitants paid taxes as the demand by Jesus to show the money used for that purpose (Matt 22.19, Mark 12.15, Luke 20,24). The subject of the actual practical payment of soldiers has been very thoroughly discussed in Reddé 2014 but unfortunately details of actual coins and their names are rare, and most of the evidence relates to the later first century AD and beyond. Particularly useful is the paper by van Heesch (Reddé 2014, 139-160). If the army insisted on being paid in Roman Denarii wherever they were and at all times then this would suggest a number of Denarii circulating in Jerusalem and the region around in the early first century. It would provide a burden of transport, security and supply, but this was no greater than elsewhere in the empire where there is no doubt that it was firmly managed. There are matters of circulation to be worked out and money-changers would have to come into the picture. If the army set such store by these coins they may well have been preferentially regarded by the local population as symbols of authority and perhaps as more reliable coins to save, and in that case one would expect them to have been preferentially hoarded in Palestine in comparison with the many local silver coins in circulation. The question of coins and hoards actually found will be discussed later.

The introduction of money-changers takes up references in the Gospels but unfortunately introduces an element of uncertainty. Money changers in the temple were perhaps there for the purchase of Jewish silver coins to pay the Temple tax, but also to change gold or silver for every day uses. It is generally held that a silver or gold coin could not be tendered, for example for a purchase, in expectation of receiving change in lower value coins, but it is still impossible, so far as I know, to give a firm ancient text to confirm this. The user must first take the Denarius to the money-changer and receive back smaller denominations with a fee deducted. Such transactions are recorded but only as specific cases and not as a universal rule. So a Denarius worth sixteen Asses might be given, and fifteen Asses returned.

The fact that when Jesus upsets the tables of the money-changers (John 2.15) it is bronze/copper that is scattered might suggest that changers had the small change in piles on their tables ready to exchange the suitable pile for a silver or gold coin which would be tucked away in a purse. Whether we should directly connect 'the coin to pay the taxes' with money-changers is uncertain. If we do make the connection then it might suggest that taxes had to be paid in specified named denominations. To bring the Denarius in here is to create a forbidding scenario by which the Roman state had to make available a Denarius which each inhabitant could 'purchase' from the money-changers simply to take to another table to pay the tax. Since locally minted silver Drachmas circulated freely in Palestine the magnitude of the effort necessary for that cycle and, I think it is fair to say, the pointlessness of it, may well allow us to note the possibility but leave it aside.

The idea of striking their own coins arrived late in Rome compared with the Greek influenced parts of the Mediterranean coastland. As Rome extended its power this was always over areas which already struck and used coinage of their own. Perhaps this was because it indicated a social organisation which could be taken over as contrasted with disorganisation. Whatever the explanation the move into Gaul, with a well-developed coinage, was eventually successful. But Germany, with no local coinages, and after the Varus disaster of AD 6, remained 'Free'. Romans, and Roman coinage, in Palestine can therefore be compared with areas such as Pompeii and Gaul through excellent recent studies of those two areas (Hobbs 2013, Martin 2014).

While there is no doubt about the Roman take-over of Palestine in the mid first century BC the coinage being struck continued the pattern before the conquest so far as denominations were concerned. This meant that the visible changes were in the types on the reverses which sometimes showed Roman objects connected with the governors/procurators and occasionally the use of Latin letters rather than Hebrew or Greek. The extent of Romanisation has therefore to depend on

comparison of two main sources, the archaeological finds and the written evidence. The archaeological finds are substantial though a full study of coin finds in Jerusalem has to rely on the work of Donald Ariel published in 1982 (Ariel 1982) and, so far as I know, not yet superceded. These coins however come from a variety of different backgrounds so that there is only a little information on the dates of loss or deposition. It will therefore be simplest to rely on the report of some 3145 coins of all dates from the several excavations carried out in the city by Kenyon in the 1960s (Reece et al. in Prag 2008) supplemented by the excellent report by Ariel on some 700 coins from a more recent excavation (Ariel in Ben-Ami 2013, 237-264). These two sources agree in general on the important points to be raised later mainly on the presence or absence of Rome-minted denominations and issues.

There is one way in which the evidence from Gaul, Jerusalem and Pompeii is uniform, This is the provision, use and loss of the smallest denomination. At Pompeii, though in the early first century AD the small denominations and copies of earlier centuries seem still to be in use, by the time Vesuvius erupted in AD 79 the loose change in the bar of L Vetudius Placidus had moved on to a great majority of Roman issues (Hobbs Table 1, p.9). In Gaul in the early first century AD coins were still being halved and quartered but these were the Roman issues with few Gaulish small coins still in circulation. The picture in Jerusalem is different. There society was very well provided with the smallest value copper coins which were lost, so our excavated evidence says, in great numbers and the provision of such coins continued under the Procurators with very little change till after the death of Jesus. While money-using society in Gaul and Pompeii adjusted to the new Roman coins this did not happen in Jerusalem with the result that Roman bronze and copper coins would have been irrelevant, even if they had reached Jerusalem in any numbers.

So what do the coins found in Jerusalem consist of? Here we need to take into account the evidence from Pompeii where gold and silver coins are found on the bodies of people fleeing from the disaster but are almost unknown in ordinary day to day contexts where attention would be given to finding them if they were once dropped or mislaid. The woman in the house losing a silver Drachma is a good local illustration of this. Yet coins from large excavated sites, often running into the thousands, do include silver coins, but in much smaller numbers than the more common bronze. The Tyropoeon coins are an excellent illustration here for there was one silver coin - a silver Shekel of Tyre, among more than 700 copper coins, unfortunately not more closely datable than roughly 50 BC to AD 50. The Ariel survey (Ariel 1982) as summarised in the first volume of Roman Provincial Coinage (RPC, 582) found just three silver coins of the Republic, Antony and Tiberius.

Silver coins are more commonly found in hoards than in site finds so Butcher's summary of hoards in the Roman Province of Syria and surrounds may help here (Butcher 2004, 270-2). He found 10 hoards, all of silver coins in the period AD 1 to 67. In nine of those hoards there was one Denarius and about 314 regional silver issues. One hoard, that called 'Mount Carmel', contained 4850 silver coins of which 275 were Roman Denarii. Combined these figures suggest that Denarii of the early first century AD did exist in the region at a very rough proportion of between 1 and 6% of the total silver coinage. However the fact remains that not one was found among the coins of the excavated material. The authors of RPC (587) consider the virtual absence of Denarii in the following terms:

> "By the end of the first century (AD) the circulation of Denarii seems to have become well established. Mentions in the Bible and Rabbinic texts may suggest the currency of Denarii at an earlier date but may only refer to its use as a unit of account."

Yet the Denarius is the most commonly mentioned coin name in the Gospels and the use as a unit of account would not explain this because virtually every mention is of a single silver material object. The actual mentions of the Denarius in the Gospels rarely cause interpretative problems.

Interpretation may start off from its mention as a daily wage in the vineyards, and from this modern parallels maybe suggested. The Good Samaritan leaves two 'daily wages' with the inn-keeper for the board and lodging of the victim, and debts of six weeks' (50 Denarii) wages and above seem reasonable. It is only when numbers move into the hundreds that doubt may creep in. The ointment which could have been sold for a whole year's (300 Denarii) wages. What about the bread for the feeding of the five thousand rated at 200 Denarii? Though the calculation is highly precarious it gives a reassuring result. We can take the price of bread from the conversations at the dinner recorded in the Satyricon of Petronius (Sat 44). 'In the old days the bread you could buy for an As was more than you and a mate could get through'. Taking this at face value and ignoring price differences in South Italy and Palestine, the Apostles might have to pay an As for a loaf that would feed three people. With 5000 (men? so 10,000 people?) that would be roughly 1700 (? 3400) Asses. With 16 Asses in each Denarius that would be roughly 100 (?200) Denarii. Though this calculation is highly questionable it would seem to make the Apostles remarkable budgeters.

One point has not yet been mentioned and that is translation. It is usually accepted that the gospels were written originally in Greek. As Christianity spread, translations were needed into Latin and Coptic, to quote the texts most commonly referred to. Coptic is beyond my competence, but might be a fruitful aspect for study. Latin has been included in the table of references in appendix 2. Staying with Denarii it might be expected that the original Greek perhaps even the original sayings, would have used the common silver coin, the Drachma. This would have caused uncertainty in the Latin West, so a translation resulting in our present Latin text might quite properly have substituted Denarius for Drachma This in turn raises two problems: why does Luke telling of the woman in the house who loses a coin have Drachma and why does the Greek text not retain throughout the almost certain original Drachma?

These problems can be added to the difficulties suggested above with the As and the Dupondius together with Mark's helpful explanation that two Lepta or Minuta make a Quadrans. Sestertii, Dupondii and Asses together with Semisses and Quadrantes are totally missing from the excavated evidence even though they are exactly the level of value that would be expected to be lost and not recovered if they really were in local circulation. Instead the smallest coins which may well represent the Lepta were lost, and therefore presumably, used in profusion.

We therefore have to take into account the rarity of Roman denominations in both site finds and hoards. We must add the severe doubts expressed above on the ability of army pay in Denarii, which is needed at the relevant date to result in the person in the street having Denarii in their purses ready to be identified when Jesus asked. There is also the unlikelihood of the money-changers being provided with enough Denarii for all to pay their taxes.

It is hardly surprising that this accumulation of problems, leads to the suggestion that most coin names have been inserted in an earlier text to explain local Palestinian matters to a wider audience But these 'Palestinian matters' are common to virtually the whole of the Greek speaking world the Mediterranean East of Italy, so that the 'wider audience' is the Latin speaking West This in turn means that the coin names in the Gospels as we have them cannot be a reflection of the different origins and backgrounds of the writers of the four Gospels since it is usually assumed that they at least originated in the Greek East.

If these thoughts and observations are correct, and at present I can find no way around them, it means that though there can be no doubt about Romans in Palestine, references to Roman coins in the Gospels cannot be used to demonstrate Romanitas in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, and that actual hard evidence of coin finds backs up the suggestion beyond reasonable doubt.

Appendix 1. The speakers and contexts.

Sayings in direct speech from Jesus.

Minutum (G:Lepton)	Luke 12.59. debt claimed to the last Lepton	
Quadrans	Matt. 5.26. debt claimed to the last Quadrans	
As	Matt. 10.29 two sparrows-like birds sold for an As	
Dipondius (G: two Asses)	Luke 12.6 Five sparrows sold for a Dupondius	
Drachma	Luke 15.8	If you have 10 Drachmas and lose one, search
Denarius	Matt 22.19, Mark 12.15, Luke 20.24 Denarius for paying tax	
	Matt. 18.28, Luke 7.41 debts of 50, 100 and 500 Denarii	
	Luke 10.25 Good Samaritan leaves 2 Denarii for victim	
	Matt 20.1 Labourers in the vineyard 1 Denarius a day	
Stater	Matt 17.27 In the mouth of a fish for paying taxes	

Reported speech from Jesus

Aes (G: Kerma)	Mark 6.8	Apostles should not take money on journeys
(G: Chalkon)	Matt, 10.9	as above - Nor gold nor silver.

Comments from the apostles

Denarius	Mark 14 5, John 12 .5 ointment could have been sold for 300 Den
	Mark 6.37, John 6.7 feeding 5000, more than 200 Den for bread

Appendix 2. The actual words used

Denomination	Reference G = Greek, L = Latin Chapter. Verse
Minutum	Mark L 12.42; Luke L 12.5 9, 21.2
Lepton	Mark G 12.42; Luke G 12.59, 21.2
Quadrans	Matt GL 5.26; Mark GL 12.42
As	Matt G Assarion L As 10.29, Luke G Assarion 12.6
Dipondius	Luke G two Assaria L Dipondius 12.6
Drachma	Luke GL Drachma/Dragma 15,8
Didrachma	Matt GL Didrachma/Didragma 17.24
Denarius	12 refs all GL Denarius.
	Matt 18.28, 20.1, 2119; Mark 6.37, 12.15, 14.5: Luke 7.41, 10.35. 20.24; John 6.7, 12.5; Revelation 6.6
Argyrion	Matt 26.15 G Argyrion (weighed) L Argenteus (?agreed),
	Matt 27.3 G Argyrion L Argenteus;
	Acts 19.19 G Argyrion L Denarius
Stater	Matt 17.27 GL Stater
Kerma/ChalkonlAes	Mark 6.8 G chalkon L aes, 12.41 G chalkon L aes, John 2.15 G kerma L aes
Gold/silver/bronze	Matt 10.9 G chrison-argyrion-chalkon
	L aurum-argentum-pecunia

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