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WAS THE DENARIUS A DAILY WAGE?

A NOTE ON THE PARABLE

OF THE TWO DEBTORS IN LUKE 7:40–43

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: *This note provides a brief overview of Roman economic history and currency in order to throw light on the value and significance of the two debts illustratively used by Jesus in his parable to Simon the Pharisee. Though we cannot with accuracy make the claim that a Roman denarius was always the daily wage, we can determine that the debtors of Jesus's parable owed something on the order of a year's worth of wages and ten years' worth of wages.*

The parable of the two debtors in Luke 7:40–43 poses a scenario of contrast between two servants, each in debt to a creditor. This is a three-point parable, with three main characters, each representing a lesson to derive from the story. The three characters are (1) a lord or master, or in this instance a creditor, who represents the Lord; (2) a servant in debt to the lord for 500 denarii; and (3) another servant in debt for 50 denarii. These two contrasted servants represent the readers or listeners.¹ Jesus shares this parable with Simon the Pharisee, who had expressed distaste for Jesus's having his feet washed by a sinful woman. To castigate Simon's lack of charity and to highlight why Jesus's forgiveness of the woman meant more to her than the same forgiveness might mean to Simon, Jesus tells the parable of two debtors. In doing so, Jesus hopes

1. Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990). Blomberg identifies the following New Testament parables as representing the "three-point form" of a parable: Matthew 11:16–19; 13:24–30, 36–43; 13:47–50; 21:28–32; 24:45–51; 25:1–13; Luke 7:41–43; 15:4–7; 15:8–10; 15:11–32; and 16:19–31.

Simon will recognize his error and empathize more fully with the sinful woman as she rejoices in the forgiveness of her overpowering debt.

In order to magnify the meaning of the parable in our modern day, this research note will answer the questions: What was a denarius? How much was it worth? Was the denarius a daily wage? The answers to these questions helps us contextualize the value, amount, or the relative significance of the debt these two servants carried and helps us to clarify the parable's significance and application for our own lives.

Brief History of the Origin of the Denarius

Though coins were not unknown on the Italian peninsula between 900 BC and 300 BC, most numismatists of Roman coinage date the origins of the Roman coinage system to approximately 300 BC. This system consisted of four original independent units, large bronze bars, struck silver coins, struck bronze coins, and large bronze discs, all of which became somewhat systematized and interrelated around 250 BC. Nevertheless, at this early period, the Roman economy was still only partially monetarized. For example, the military was not paid in coins, but in kind or through the spoils captured in conquest. In essence, the Romans did not have a pervasive and workable coinage system. Instead, they intermixed local coinage systems with their own unregulated and rather unsystematized coinage types.²

Standardization of the coinage system and monetarizing of the society quickly changed during the Second Punic War (218–201 BC), when Romans battled Carthage for supremacy in the Mediterranean basin. The existing Roman monetary system suffered because of the heavy financial strains brought on by war. In an effort to raise money, the Roman leaders devalued their existing coinage system: they struck gold coins, debased silver coins, and reduced weight standards. But these financial strategies failed to produce the intended monetary gains. Effectively, Hannibal's war against Romans destroyed the original Roman coinage system. In its place, the Romans invented the denarius system, creating a monetary standardization that persisted for nearly half a millennium.³

2. Kenneth W. Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Michael H. Crawford, *Coinage and Money Under the Roman Republic: Italy and the Mediterranean Economy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

3. Robert A.G. Carson, *Principals Coins of the Romans. Volume I: The Republic c. 290–31 BC* (London: British Museum Publications, 1978); Michael H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

The word *denarius* is a Latin adjective that means “of ten” or “containing ten.”⁴ As a monetary unit, the denarius was originally a silver coin valued at 10 *asses*. The Roman bronze *as* was the official unit of reckoning, much like the dollar is today for the USA. Because of its connection to the popular coin, the Latin adjective *denarius* eventually became used as a noun.⁵

With the invention of this new coinage system around 212–211 BC, Romans became more aggressive at ensuring that Roman coins were used in all transactions, and the Roman military began to use the denarius to pay soldiers. Originally, the denarius consisted of 4.5g silver (100 denarii would weigh about one pound), though throughout the centuries, war and economic crises precipitated weight decreases and silver debasement as a way to increase money. For example, about 140 BC, the values of silver and bronze had not maintained a relational balance, and so Romans retariffed the denarius at the value of 16 bronze *asses* instead of 10. Though this numerical relationship (16 *asses* to 1 denarius) persisted for nearly 400 years, continual debasement eventuated in the antoninianus, or double denarius, becoming the principle Roman coin by AD 238. Thereafter, the Roman Empire rapidly decreased minting new denarii, and this standard of the Roman coinage system that had endured for 500 years disappeared from currency.⁶

Was the Denarius the Standard Daily Wage?

The denarius was never the standard daily wage for employment in the Roman world, unless one considers the rare historical moment when it was the daily wage for a Roman legionary, notably during the New Testament period. Simply put, the sheer vastness of geography and chronology make it nearly impossible to calculate what a daily wage would be in the Roman Empire. Even if it were possible to calculate, that daily wage would fluctuate

4. John Melville Jones, s.v. “Denarius,” *A Dictionary of Ancient Roman Coins* (London: Seaby, 1990), 85–88.

5. The word *denarius* influenced the use of other monetary terms in other languages still in use today, such as the *dinar* (Iraq) and *dinero* (a word that generally means *money* in Spanish-speaking countries).

6. For a general overview of coin value debasement in the ancient world, see Christopher Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins* (London: Routledge, 1995), especially chapter 6, “Crisis”; R.A.G. Carson, *Principals Coins of the Romans. Volume II: The Principate c. 31 BC - AD 296* (London: British Museum Publications, 1980); Aurelio Bernardi, “The Economic Problems of the Roman Empire at the Time of its Decline,” in *The Economic Decline of Empires*, ed. Carlo M. Cipolla (London: Methuen & Co., 1970): 16–83.

from profession to profession.⁷ Our own society provides a vivid portrayal of the difficulty in determining what represents a daily wage. In the United States today, there is no standard by which to measure a daily wage, even though the federal government has imposed a minimum hourly wage and an arbitrary dividing line to distinguish those in poverty from those who are not. Then, as now, the value of a daily wage is determined by its capacity to purchase the basic needs for daily survival. In the Roman Empire, this included wheat, oil, and wine.

Historians of the ancient Roman economy estimate that each year the average male citizen required 48 modii (705 pounds) of wheat, 48 sextarii (7 gallons) of oil, and 288 sextarii (43 gallons) of wine. Translated into daily rates, the average male required two pounds of wheat, one-third cup of oil, and two cups of wine. Estimates of the yearly dietary needs for a peasant family of four are 120 modii (1762 pounds) of wheat, 120 sextarii (17 gallons) of oil, and 720 sextarii (106 gallons) of wine. To purchase these dietary necessities, historians estimate a cost of 200 denarii a year in first century (ca. AD 75–125) Rome and 100 denarii a year outside of Rome.

In Palestine specifically, wheat prices were significantly cheaper, up to one-third the cost of wheat in Rome. Hence, a family of four in Palestine may have been able to survive on as little as 70 denarii a year. But that likely would have been just above subsistence living. If we define a “daily wage” as what provides sufficient for an individual’s basic dietary needs, a laborer in New Testament Palestine would need to earn one denarius about every three weeks. If that same laborer was providing for a family of four, he would need to earn about one denarius about every five days. By these calculations, inexact as they may be, for a laborer in New Testament Palestine a denarius may represent five days of earning or work. Perhaps we could conclude, working from the estimates provided by economic historians, that anyone earning a denarius or less a week during this period was living in poverty or on the margins of poverty.

Let’s return to the scene in Luke 7:41, where Jesus teaches Simon the Pharisee about love and forgiveness. In the parable that compares two indebted men, one owes 50 denarii and the other 500 denarii; it is readily apparent that both debts are considerable. However, Jesus employs this device for effect — the comparable magnitude of debt for the first man is far more onerous by an order of ten. A Palestinian man with no family obligations, in Jesus’s day, having 50 denarii in debt may owe ten months

7. Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

of wages; 500 denarii of debt would be a whopping eight or more years of wages, a veritable path of slavery.⁸

We conclude by “translating” this parable into our terms. If Jesus were speaking to Simon the Pharisee today, he might share the parable in Luke 7:40–43 in this way:

And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed \$500,000 (or eight years’ worth of labor), and the other \$50,000 (or nearly one year worth of labor). And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.

Likening scriptures to ourselves requires at times an understanding of the context in which a teaching is expressed. Understanding more about the lowly denarius is an illustrative example at point.⁹

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8. For background on the history of coins and Roman coinage in New Testament times see the following sources. Larry J. Kreitzer, *Striking New Images: Roman Imperial Coinage and the New Testament World* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

9. Sources consulted for this article but not appearing in other footnotes include: Andrew Burnett, *Coinage in the Roman World* (London: Seaby, 1987); Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Daniel Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 248–71; Daniel Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 9 (1966): 182–211; Daniel Sperber, “Palestinian Currency Systems during the Second Commonwealth,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 56, no. 4 (1966): 273–301; Daniel Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 11 (1968): 233–74; Daniel Sperber, “Costs of Living in Roman Palestine,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 13 (1970): 1–15; Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200–400: Money and Prices* (Ramat-Gan, ISR: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1974); Peter Temin, “The Economy of the Early Roman Empire,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20:1 (2006): 133–51; Rachel M. McCleary and Robert J. Barro, “Religion and Economy,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (2006): 49–72.

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