Southwestern Journal of Theology

Southwestern Journal of Theology • Volume 62 • Number 1 • Fall 2019

An Assarion for Your Thoughts: The Challenges of Translating NT Numismatic Terms

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The penny is unique in US coinage. It is rich in lore ("a penny for your thoughts," pennies from heaven, and penny loafers, to name a few) but has so little value that the US mint may soon stop making it. However, sometimes a penny is deceiving. In modern Bible translations, a "penny" or "cent" is actually *not* a penny. It is an assarion (also known as an as), lepton, or kodrantēs[1]—none of which are worth a penny today. Welcome to the confusing conundrum of translating numismatic terms in the New Testament, in which Bible translations are anything but clear and consistent.

For instance, what did the widow put in the temple treasury on Tuesday of the Passion Week (Mark 12:42; Luke 21:2)? Were λεπτὰ δύο actually "two pennies" (NLiv[2]), "two mites" (KJV), "two small copper coins" (ESV), "two very small copper coins" (NIV84), "two little copper coins" (GNT), "two tiny coins" (CSB), "two small coins" (GW), "two copper coins" (RSV), or "two coins" (CEV)? One might argue that most of these terms are similar, but what of the worth of the two coins? Here it is even more confusing. Did

[1]This paper will not italicize transliterated coin names but will italicize transliterated Greek text.

[2]The following abbreviations appear in this article: CEV: Contemporary English Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1995), ESV: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), GNB: Good News Bible: Today's English Version, 2nd ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1992), GW: GOD'S WORD Translation, Logos ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), CSB: Christian Standard Bible (Nashville: Holman Bible, 2017), KJV: King James Version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, n.d.), LEB: Lexham English Bible, 4th ed., Logos ed. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013), NET: NET Bible, 1st ed., Logos ed. (Biblical Studies, 2005), NASB95: New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: Lochman Foundation, 1995), NCV: New Century Version, Logos ed. (Thomas Nelson, 2005), NEB: New English Bible with the Apocrypha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), NIV84: New International Version (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984), NJB: New Jerusalem Bible (NY: Doubleday, 1973); NKJV: New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), NLiv: New Living Translation, ref. ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1996), NRSV: New Revised Standard Version, Logos ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), RSV: Revised Standard Version, Logos ed. (n.p., 1901), TNIV: Today's New International Version, Logos ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), TNT: Tyndale New Testament (1534), BibleWorks 9 ed.; Voice, The Voice Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), YLT: Young's Literal Translation, Logos ed. (1898).

their total (κοδράντης) amount to more than a penny, such as "a few pennies" (CEV)? Or, was the value a "penny" (ESV)? Maybe they were worth "a fraction of a penny" (NIV84) or a "farthing" (KJV)?[3] The CSB opts for the worth as "very little." "Very little" also aptly describes how much agreement modern Bible translations have in handling New Testament numismatic terms.

One might argue that a penny-or-two variation in translation makes little difference in correctly comprehending the previous verses, but the problem becomes more pronounced when a large sum is in question. For instance, what did the steward owe the king in the parable of the unforgiving steward in Matthew 18:23–35? Should one translate μυρίων ταλάντων in v. 24 as "ten thousand talents" with no marginal note (NKJV)?[4] This is confusing because the modern reader has no clue about the monetary value of a talent. Should one translate it as "ten thousand talents" with a marginal note estimating the value (ESV)?[5] Unfortunately, the marginal notes vary greatly in describing a talent, such as "more than fifteen years' wages" (NASB95), "about twenty years' wages" (ESV), "6,000 denarii, or twenty years' wages for a laborer" (CSB), or "750 ounces of silver, which after five shillings the ounce is 187*l*." (KJV). Their calculated totals vary even more: "millions of dollars" (NIV84), "about $10,000,000 in silver content but worth much more in buying power" (NASB77), or "$60,000,000" (NJB). Some translations give the monetary value in translation with no marginal note: "fifty million silver coins" (CEV), "millions of dollars" (GW), or "millions of pounds" (GNT). Other translations state the value as "ten thousand bags of gold" (TNIV), "millions of dollars" (NLiv), or "millions" (NEB) and then give a marginal note that says it literally is "10,000 talents."[6]

[3]Here is a fuller list for λεπτὰ δύο: "two pennies" (NLiv), "two mites" (KJV, NKJV, YLT, TNT: "two mytes"), "two small copper coins" (ESV, NASB95, NCV, NET, NRSV, LEB), "two very small copper coins" (NIV84, TNIV), "two little copper coins" (GNT), "two tiny coins" (CSB, NEB), "two small coins" (GW, NJB, Vce), "two copper coins" (RSV), or "two coins" (CEV). For κοδράντης: "a few pennies" (CEV), "a few cents," (NCV), "penny" (ESV, NET, LEB, NRSV, RSV), "cent" (NASB77/95), "about a penny" (GNT, NJB), "less than a penny" (NET), "less than a cent" (GW), "a fraction of a penny" (NIV84, TNIV), "a fraction of a cent" (Vce), or a "farthing" (KJV, NEB, YLT, TNT: "farthynge")? Only the NKJV uses the transliteration of the Latin term for the worth: a quadrans.

[4]Although talent was a weight and not a coin term, it did have monetary value. BDAG notes the value of this "unit of coinage" varied greatly in different places and times. It also varied as to the type of metal used: copper, silver, or gold. BDAG, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v.: τάλαντον. See also LEB, RSV.

[5]See also CSB, KVJ, NASB95, NET, NIV84, and NRSV.

[6]Here are two more examples. First, great variety occurs in translating the debt that the servant in a parable owed the ungrateful steward (Matt 18:28): ἑκατὸν δηνάρια. It is translated as "one hundred denarii" (ESV, CSB, NASB95, NIV84, NKJV, NRSV, RSV), "an hundred denaries" (YLT), "one hundred silver coins" (CEV, NET, TNIV), "an hundred pence" (KJV), "a few thousand dollars" (NLiv), "hundreds of dollars" (GW), "a few pounds" (GNT, NEB), or "a few dollars" (NCV). There is a vast difference between "one hundred denarii" (wages for 100 days' work for a common laborer) and "a few dollars" (which is about thirty minutes' worth of flipping hamburger patties at a local McDonald's restaurant today). Second,

The Bible is the Word of God, and every word is "God breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Thus, one must take the utmost care when translating a biblical numismatic term so as to correctly communicate its historical context (an ancient coin), accuracy (the specific coin it was), and monetary worth in order to properly understand the meaning and message of the text. A proper translation of numismatic terms in the NT is important because comprehending the currency's monetary value in context helps one to understand the parable or event in which it appears. This paper will demonstrate the best methodology for translating NT numismatic terms by examining twenty-one major English NT translations and critiquing their methodologies.[7] Four sections comprise the paper: (1) an introduction to the coins of Palestine in Jesus' day, (2) a comparison of the translations of NT numismatic terms, (3) a brief description of the vast difference in monetary buying power between first-century AD Palestine and twenty-first-century AD United States, and (4) an evaluation of translation methodologies.

A Short Primer on First-Century Biblical Coins in Palestine

Through most of the Old Testament era, the economic system depended on bartering and using weighted metals. Coins were first struck in the mid-seventh century BC in Lydia.[8] Thus, "shekel" in most OT references meant a specific weight rather than a coin.[9] However, by the first century AD, coins were well in circulation across the Roman Empire and used alongside the systems of bartering and the use of weighted measures. Thus, the first-century Palestinian Jew dealt with Jewish, Roman, and Greek coins. Only Roman imperial mints made the gold coins (aurei), used in large commercial and military transactions.[10] These coins were rare in first-century Palestine. Imperial mints also made the silver denarius, which was the standard daily wage for a common worker. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire it was also known by its Greek equivalent, the drachma. Four drachmae equaled one stater (the Greek term in Matt 17:27) as well as one shekel. The annual temple tax each Jewish male paid was one-half shekel, which equaled a didrachm. These coins were more common in first-century Palestine, but

translations do not even agree on how to translate the Greek word for "coin"! The English word "numismatics" derives from the term νόμισμα. This word appears in the NT only in Matt 22:19. However, it is translated "coin" (ESV, CSB, GNT, GWT, NASB95, NCV, NET, NIV84, NRSV, TNIV), "tribute-coin" (YLT), "tribute money" (KJV), "money" (NEB, RSV), "tax money" (NKJV), "one of the coins" (CEV), and "the Roman coin" (NLiv).

[7]As noted in footnote 2, all of the twenty-one translations are modern translations except for the TNT (16th century), KJV (17th century), and YLT (1898)—all three used for comparative purposes.

[8]Oded Borowski, "From Shekels to Talents: Money in the Ancient World," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Sept./Oct. 1993): 69.

[9]David Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 5th ed. (New York: Amphora: 2010), 471. Hendin notes that post-captivity references such as Neh 5:15, 10:32 may refer to the *shekel* coin since it would have been in circulation by then.

[10]Hendin, *Guide to Biblical Coins*, 472.

bronze coins were by far the most common coins in use at the time—needed for purchasing food and various daily items.

These coin terms appear in the NT: ἀσσάριον, δηνάριον, δίδραχμα, δραχμή, κοδράντης, λεπτός, μνᾶ, and στατήρ. There is also a coin sum, τάλαντον, the general term ἀργύριον (silver), and the word for coin: νόμισμα. One can see in the chart below that these are a mixture of Roman and Greek coin terms.

The main coin smaller than a denarius was the as (or, assarion), and sixteen asses equaled a denarius. Half an as was a semi, and half a semi was a quadrans (Greek kodrantēs). Romans typically quoted everyday prices in dupondii and sestertii.[11] However, in Jesus' day the Jewish and Greek currency and terms were usually used in Palestine. The smallest coin was the lepton, and it was worth 1/128 of a denarius.

Interestingly, the mite—the most well-known NT numismatic translation (Mark 12:42a and Luke 12:59 in KJV, NKJV, YLT)—is *neither* the name of a first-century AD coin nor a coin in use in seventeenth-century England. Although the KJV normally used the names of current coins to translate the names of biblical coins, the translators either borrowed "mite" from mathematics or from the Tyndale translation, which likely used the name for a specific Flemish coin named mite. There were twenty-four mites to the Flemish penning.[12] The term is confusing today because the only mite people are familiar with is the dust mite—a critter, not a coin.

The following chart gives the coin values in relation to one another:

Roman		**Greek**		**Jewish**[13]
quadrans (bronze)		2 lepta (Mark 12:42)		
2 quadrantes	1 semi (bronze/ copper)			
2 semis	1 as (assarion) (red bronze) (Matt 10:29; Luke 12:6)			
2 asses	1 dupondius (yellow bronze)			
4 asses	1 sestertius (bronze)			

[13]This chart is adapted from Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 93, as well as Lawrence E. McKinney, "Coins and the New Testament: From Ancient Palestine to the Modern Pulpit," *Review and Expositor* 106 (Summer 2009): 474.

16 asses	1 denarius (silver) (Matt 20:2; 22:19; Rev 6:6)	1 drachma (silver) (Luke 15:8)	6 obols	
		2 drachmae (didrachm) (Matt 17:24a)		½ shekel (silver)
		4 drachmae (tetradrachm)	1 stater (Matt 17:24–27; 26:15; Ex 30:13)	1 shekel (silver)
1 aureus (gold)	25 denarii			
		100 drachmae	1 mina (Luke 19:13)	
240 aurei (gold)	1 talent (Matt 25:14ff; 18:23–35)	6,000 drachmae		

Comparison of Translating NT Numismatic Terms

Scripture translations use one of three primary translation methodologies. First, Formal Equivalence (hereafter, FE) is also called Essentially Literal[14] or "word for word" translation. In this method the translator, as much as possible, brings each word in the original language into a corresponding word in the receptor language. This process can lead to a stilted or wooden translation; however, it best preserves the original language structure, and it conveys the greatest amount of the original grammatical and syntactical meaning of each word. The ESV, KJV, NASB, NKJV, RSV, and YLT are examples of the FE approach.

Second, for some fifty years Eugene Nida championed the Functional Equivalence method (also called Dynamic Equivalence [DE][15] or "thought for thought" translation), but the latter description is sometimes a misnomer. This translator examines the original grammatical and syntactical meaning of each word, clause, sentence, and paragraph. Then he decides how best to communicate that meaning into the receptor language. Thus, the word structure may be different in the receptor language, but the goal is accuracy in meaning. This method results in a more readable and less stilted text than

[14]See, Wayne Grudem, Leland Ryken, et al., *Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

[15]This paper will use DE for Functional Equivalence for two reasons: (1) it makes it easier to distinguish from the abbreviation for Formal Equivalence (FE), and (2) Dynamic Equivalence was the original term for this method.

the FE method. The CEV, GNB, GW, NCV, NLiv, and NRSV follow the DE approach.[16] Yet, does it sacrifice accuracy for readability?

Some recent translations purposefully take a third, mediating or hybrid, approach (Mediating Equivalence, ME) in various guises.[17] The Christian Standard Bible (CSB) calls their hybrid approach the Optimal Equivalence method, noting that it is difficult to retain a pure FE or DE approach to translation. So, it starts with the FE approach but resorts to the DE method when necessary.[18] Somewhat similarly, the Voice translation names their hybrid approach Contextual Equivalence. Their translators attempt to preserve both the literary and linguistic features of the original text. By focusing on the contexts of the original language as well as the contemporary audience, they go back and forth between whatever works best in each situation: word for word or thought for thought.[19] The NIV84 and TNIV also use a hybrid approach.

Six possible methods can render a NT numismatic term: four types of translations, a transliteration (bringing the ancient term, letter by letter, into the receptor language), or a combination of methods. The κοδράντης (Mark 12:42b) in the widow's mite event (what her two lepta were worth) will provide most of the examples here. There are two types of formal translations: (1) translate it into the closest modern equivalent coin in the receptor language culture, such as "worth a penny" (an exact modern coin equivalent) (NRSV), or (2) translate it into an ancient language equivalent that may be known to modern readers, such as "shekel" for stater in Matthew 17:27 (ESV).[20] The next two methods are dynamic translations of Mark 12:42b: (3) translate it into a modern monetary value, such as "worth a few cents" (NCV) or "worth only a fraction of a penny" (NIV84, TNIV), or (4) translate it into a generic monetary equivalent, such as "worth very little" (CSB). The final two options are: (5) transliteration, such as "quadrans" (NKJV) in Mark 12:42b, or (6) a combination of the previous methods within the text itself, such as "the regular wage, a silver coin a day" for δηναρίου in Matthew 20:2.

Twenty-one translations in this study were compared as to how they render twenty-one numismatic terms.[21] How do the twenty-one translations

[16]See the charts in Wayne Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God?" in Grudem, *Translating*, 22, and Andreas J. Köstenberger and David A. Croteau, "A Short History of Bible Translation" in *Which Bible Translation Should I Use? A Comparison of 4 Major Recent Versions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 21. Note: each translation mentioned above falls into a gradient spectrum within its category.

[17]This paper will use "ME" (Mediating Equivalence) for this hybrid method.

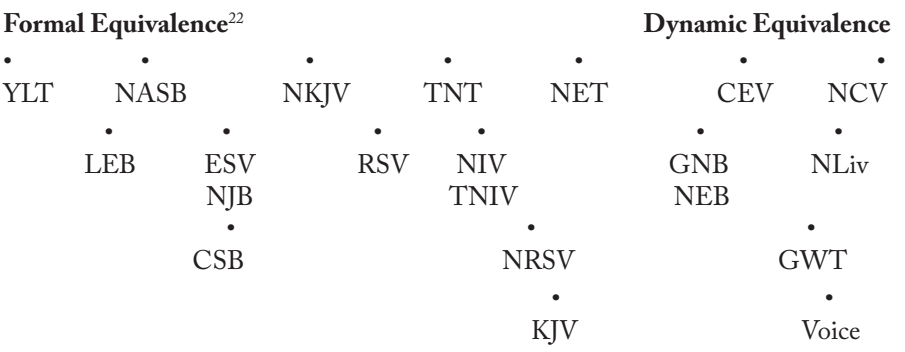
[18]Christian Standard Bible, viii.

[19]The Voice New Testament, xii–xiv.

[20]See also NASB95, NJB, and RSV.

[21]When the same term is used more than one time in a pericope, only the first use is cited (the underlined verse): denarius (Matt 20:2, 9, 10, 13), talent (Matt 25:15, 16, 20, 22, 24, 25, 28), mina (Luke 19:13, 16, 18, 20, 24, 25), and drachma (Luke 15:8, 9). Since John 6:7 and Mark 6:37 are parallel, the latter passage is not considered. Mark 12:42a and Luke 21:2 are parallel, but both are examined since the CEV renders them differently. Although talent

compare with one another? The following graph illustrates where each stand in translating NT numismatic terms:



Interestingly, no modern translation reflects a consistent approach in how they translate NT numismatic terms.[23] Although the way each version renders coin terms is generally consistent with its stated translation methodology (such as the YLT remaining an FE translation and the NCV being a DE translation), none are totally consistent. Confusingly, they all take a varied approach in translating coin terms, as the chart above illustrates. For instance, the YLT has the most transliterations (15) in this study, but it also has 6 modern coin terms. On the other end of the spectrum, the NCV has the most Dynamic general values (10), but it also has 2 modern coin terms, 2 types of coins, and 2 generic coin terms.[24]

An additional factor is worth noting. The use or lack of marginal notes greatly impacts how well the reader understands an ancient numismatic term. YLT has 15 transliterations of numismatic terms in this study, but

is more of a weight than a coin, its worth can be calculated, yet it is not included in the chart above since it is not an actual coin. Conversely, *argurion* does not appear in the chart because it means "silver" or "money" and does not have a value in the context that can be calculated (Matt 25:18, 27; 26:15; 27:3, 5, 6, 9; 28:12, 15; Mark 14:11; Luke 9:3; 19:15, 23; 22:5; Acts 3:6; 7:16; 8:20; 19:19; 20:33; 1 Pet 1:18). Also, *nomisma* does not have a specific value since it means "coin" (Matt 22:19).

[22]The 21 verses compared are: assarion (Matt 10:29; Luke 12:6), kodrantēs (Matt 5:26; Mark 12:42b), didrachma (Matt 17:24a, b), stater (Matt 17:27), lepton (Mark 12:42a; Luke 12:59, 21:2), drachma (Luke 15:8), mna (Luke 19:13), dēnarion (Matt 18:28, 20:2, 22:19; Luke 7:41, 10:35, 20:23; John 6:7, 12:5; Rev 6:6). For example, here are translations of στατῆρα in Matt 17:27, graded in 6 categories—from the most Formal to the most Dynamic: (1) "stater" (transliteration), (2) "shekel" (ancient coin equivalent), (3) "20 pence" (modern coin equivalent), (4) "silver coin" (type of coin), (5) "coin" (a coin), (6) "piece of money" (generic).

[23]Of course, most translations reflect the work of a committee deciding how to apply their methodology in each instance. Young's is the work of one person.

[24]Here is the breakdown of each translation in the six divisions of footnote #22: CEV (0:0:3:6:5:7), ESV (10:2:5:3:0:1), GNB (0:0:4:10:2:5), GWT (0:0:4:4:5:8), CSB (12:0:4:3:1:1), KJV (0:0:17:1:0:3), LEB (13:1:5:2:0:0), NET (4:1:4:5:3:4), NASB95 (12:1:5:3:0:0), NCV (0:0:2:3:6:10), NEB (0:0:6:8:0:7), NIV84 (7:1:4:4:0:5), NJB (9:3:6:2:0:1), NKJV (10:1:4:3:0:3), NLiv (0:0:4:3:3:11), NRSV (6:0:6:3:1:5), RSV (7:2:5:3:2:2), TNIV (7:1:4:4:0:5), TNT (0:0:19:0:0:2), Voice (2:1:1:4:1:12), YLT (15:0:6:0:0:0).

there are no marginal notes, so the reader does not know the meaning or value of the terms. The TNT and KJV often use outdated coin terms the modern reader will not understand. The NASB95, LEB, CSB, and NKJV have the most transliterated coin terms along with helpful marginal notes for most of the terms.

Determining Monetary Value

Once one determines how best to translate a NT numismatic term, it is helpful to determine the value in today's currency. The denarius was worth one day's wage for an unskilled laborer. Based on the current minimum wage of $7.25 per hour in almost half of the states in the US, a day's wage today is $58, based on an 8-hour day.[25] Thus, an ancient half shekel (the annual temple tax) is worth $116 today (1/2 shekel = 2 denarii), and an ancient shekel is worth $232 today (1 shekel = 4 denarii). An assarion would be worth $3.63 today (16 asses = 1 denarius), and a lepton is worth 45¢ today (128 lepta = 1 denarius). A quadrans is worth twice a lepton: 90¢.

Of course, figuring the current monetary value of ancient coins must be nation and time specific. Although the evaluations and conclusion of this paper can apply to translating NT numismatic terms into any language today, the monetary calculations given above will work only for the US in 2019. When the minimum wage changes in subsequent years, the calculations will be out of date and need to be revised. Even if the minimum wage remains the same next year, the worth of the US dollar is never static due to daily factors such as inflation and its value in relation to other currency. The ancient coin value equivalent in other modern countries will be much different for other countries since the average daily wage today varies greatly from country to country and from year to year. For instance, a lower-middle income country today, such as Egypt and Ukraine, has an average per capita daily wage in 2019 of $10.46, so the daily wage of a common laborer is even lower. A low-income country, such as Mozambique and Madagascar, has a per capita daily wage in 2019 of $1.68. Based on these per capita daily wages, an assarion (1/16 of the daily wage) in those two economies is worth 65¢ and 11¢ respectively, and a quadrans (1/64 of a daily wage) is worth 16¢ and 3¢ respectively.[26] A number of translations render assarion and quadrans as "penny" or "cent" but they are worth more than that today in even destitute economies, and they are worth far more than that in the US economy.

Moving to the unit greater than a denarius, based on $58 for a denarius, a talent (6,000 denarii) is worth $348,000. A talent equals 6,000 denarii. Another way to calculate a talent is by the number of workdays required to earn it. Based on a lunar calendar of 48 weeks, and counting one day off a

[25]An 8-hour day is the standard for calculating the modern equivalent of a day's wage.

[26]Calculations are based on "Average Income around the World," WorldData, https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php. This writer is unable to find a minimum wage in low-middle-income and low-income countries, thus the calculations are based on the average per capita income.

week, a talent is worth 20.8 years of work. If one has no day off, a talent is worth 17.9 years of work. Obviously, even one talent was beyond viable ownership for the vast majority of people in first-century AD Palestine. Even in twenty-first century US, a monetary unit equivalent to 20.8 years of work is beyond attainable ownership for many people.

The Gap in Buying Power

However, even when one determines the modern equivalent value of an ancient coin term, another major challenge remains: the 2,000-year-wide cultural gap between first-century Palestine and twenty-first-century US. There is much disparity in buying power due to the two vastly different economies. A proper understanding of this coin chasm will help one's interpretation of NT monetary references.

It is hard to imagine an economy further apart from the first-century Palestinian economy than the twenty-first-century US economy. In the US today, a minimum-wage worker has more buying power than a wealthy person in ancient Palestine could ever imagine.[27] This difference is because a modern person in the US has more variety in goods, better products, more plentiful goods, and less expensive products for purchase. The gap in buying power is due to five benefits of the modern US economy: (1) a competitive free market, (2) a post-Industrial Revolution economy, (3) modern technology, (4) a scalable economy, and (5) and abundant wealth—all of which are radically different than the agrarian economy of Jesus' day.[28] A brief examination of each of these benefits will show how far apart these two economies really are.

Competitive Free Market Economy

The competitive free market economy in the US is better than the agrarian economy in Jesus' day in at least four distinct areas: (1) ownership of property, (2) labor wages, (3) accessible wealth, and (4) a truly free market. Briefly, in first-century Palestine, few people owned land, few people earned wages, there was no middle class and wealth was concentrated in the ruling elite, and the market was highly taxed and limited. All economies prior to the Industrial Revolution were far different from the wealthy economy in the US today.[29] For instance, many people in the US can own private property,

[27]Buying power in this paper refers to one's ability to purchase goods and services that significantly affect one's standard of living, such as health care products and technological goods.

[28]This writer is indebted to Craig V. Mitchell for help in suggesting and clarifying these points and for helpful feedback from Matt Wicker.

[29]Douglas E. Oakman, "The Ancient Economy," in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Richard L. Rohrbaugh (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 128. The Industrial Revolution was a period of rapid economic change, starting in Britain in the 1760s. New technologies that led to new manufacturing techniques brought about the Industrial Revolution.

earn wages from labor, own and invest wealth, and participate in the free market system, such as the unencumbered buying and selling of property and goods.[30] The states in the USA are the size of many countries, and the benefit of having no tariffs makes goods inexpensive to market in interstate trade.

Post-Industrial Revolution Economy

The ancient world changed little across thousands of years. However, today one experiences change on a regular basis in the US. Moore's Law has been in effect for over fifty years: that computers double in capability every two years while the price remains the same.[31] In contrast, it is hard to fathom how little the world changed prior to the Industrial Revolution. Gregory Clark documents that although the basic worldwide income per person varied somewhat from 1800 BC to AD 1800, which he calls the Malthusian Era[32], there was no upward swing until the Industrial Revolution. Then income skyrocketed upward. In the wealthiest economies today, wealth is ten to twenty times what it was in 1800.[33] The average North American has more wealth and more disposable income than the average person in Jesus' day ever dreamed of possessing.

Modern Technology

Technology has been advancing at an ever-increasing pace since the Industrial Revolution, and today people expect change as the norm. Breakthroughs occur regularly in health care technology, computers, smart phones, robotics, and a vast array of household and business items. It is hard to imagine how static life was back in Jesus' day. Although there were many advances in technology between the time of Christ and the Industrial Revolution, none of them ultimately affected work output.[34] Since most people in this vast period were farmers, a good measure of the advance of technology is

[30]Certainly, there are poor people in the US today who do not own property, are jobless, and are living hand-to-mouth. However, there are numerous opportunities in this country to get educated and rise out of poverty that did not exist in Jesus' day.

[31]In a 1965 paper, Intel cofounder Gordon Moore predicted that the number of transistors in an integrated circuit would double every two years, and his prediction has proven true through the years with the advent of semiconductors. Gordon E. Moore, "Cramming More Components onto Integrated Circuits," *Electronics* 38 (4–19–1965): 114–17, http://www.computerhistory.org/semiconductor/assets/media/classic-papers-pdfs/Moore_1965_Article.pdf.

[32]Gregory Clark, *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World*. The Princeton Economic History of the Western World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2, 48. Clark named this era after the groundbreaking economic insights of Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus (5).

[33]Clark, *Farewell to Alms*, 2. In an interesting contrast, the richest and poorest countries' economies today are further apart than at any time in history: a fifty-to-one gap that Clark calls The Great Divergence (3). However, examining this modern gap is beyond the scope of this paper.

[34]Certainly, some pre-Industrial Revolution inventions did directly affect work, such as the plow. However, the net production of the land per person increased slowly during this time.

how much more output the land produced per capita from one year to the next: and it was small. Prior to the Industrial Revolution technology advanced at the rate of only 0.05% per year. "In the 1,750 years between the birth of Christ and the eve of the Industrial Revolution the technology improved [merely] by a total of 24%." However, since the Industrial Revolution, successful economies experienced technology improvement of 1% or greater *every year*.[35] The number of patents granted by the U.S. Office of Patents has increased in an ever-increasing upward trend since 1790.[36] It is difficult today to imagine life in Palestine when travel, work, and cooking changed very little across many generations. The bulk of one's work was spent growing or preparing meals.

Scalable Economy

Modern technology in free market societies has led businesses in healthy economies into economies of scale for two reasons. First, technology has and continues to increase production efficiency, thus enabling companies to produce more goods and services with fewer workers. For instance, the modern assembly line at Ford dramatically reduced the number of man-hours needed to assemble an automobile engine.[37] Second, technology has and continues to lower the costs of production. When an economy of scale is achieved, a portion of the savings in production costs is passed on to consumers in the form of lower prices. Thus, in the healthy US economy, one has greater buying power due to many plentiful and economical products.[38] One clear example is in the great variety and quantity of food for purchase today versus the limited choices in Jesus' day. For the last fifty years the Green Revolution in farming has resulted in much higher yields per acre in farming. It involves new industrial technologies, improved fertilizers, and high-yield grains.[39] As a consequence, prices are lower for food due to the economy of scale.

Abundant Wealth

By many studies, the US is a wealthy nation. The "Better-Life" Index published by the OCED think tank ranks the US near the top of all world countries when taking into account eleven variables, such as income and wealth, jobs and earnings, housing, education.[40] The US has the world's

[35]Clark, *Farewell to Alms*, 134, 140.

[36]"US Patent Activity: Calendar Years 1790 to Present," U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/ac/ido/oeip/taf/h_counts.htm.

[37]Heilbroner and Thurow, 60–62.

[38]Large box stores also benefit from an economy of scale. Walmart can sell products at an economical price because of their tremendous buying power. They can buy products in bulk at a cheaper price than a small mom-and-pop store can. Jay W. Richards, *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and Not the Problem* (NY: HarperOne, 2009), 169–70.

[39]Richards, *Money, Greed, and God,* 175.

[40]"OECD Better Life Index: United States, https://bit.ly/KjxdTk.

largest GDP (gross domestic product).[41] The Human Development Index by the United Nations takes into account "a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living," and in 2013 the US was in 5th place in the world.[42]

Engel's Law says that the poorer a family is, the higher percentage of their income will be spent on food. This law applies to nations as well. The study has been proven time and again. The average family in a poor society may have to spend up to 80% of its income on food, but the average family in a wealthy country may spend as little as 5–10% of its income on food. However, the problem does not end with cost. In a poor society, hunger is every-present, and families consume the cheapest form of calories available (typically grains, beans, or potatoes) and consume them in the cheapest way possible (such as porridge or bread). Thus, the diet of a poor person is monotonous and not very nutritious.[43] The average person in the USA spends much less money on food, has much more variety in food, and has greater nutritional food than the average person in Jesus' day.

Mind the Gap

As the five benefits above demonstrate, the buying power of an equivalent sum of money in first-century Palestine and twenty-first-century US is vastly different. The Bible reader must be made aware of and appreciate this huge gap. There are two ways to do so. First, if the translation term is an ancient coin term, then the historical setting is preserved. Second, a marginal note can give a current value calculation as well as an explanation of the buying power gap. For instance, the note could say for a denarius, "Although this amount is worth $58 in today's dollars, the buying power of this amount of money is far greater today in a post-Industrial Age country, such as the US, than it was in ancient Palestine."

So, are the economies of Jesus' day and today so vastly different that one is unable to discern what Jesus meant in numismatic terms and their monetary value? No. One *can* understand what Jesus meant, but there is a wide interpretive gap involving time, culture, and economy that one must learn to appreciate and cross for a proper understanding. Using modern terms, such as "penny" and "dollar," does a disservice to the Bible reader because such anachronistic terms make it appear that no interpretive gap exists.

Examining the Possible Solutions

Name accuracy, coin clarity,[44] historical clarity, and monetary worth accuracy are four key criteria that must be met in a translation to avoid

[41]"GDP Ranked by Country, 2019," World Population Review, https://bit.ly/2JgbfUP.

[42]"Human Development Index," 54, Human Development Report 2018, United Nations Development Programme, https://bit.ly/2xhtfVF.

[43]Clark, *Farewell to Alms*, 52.

[44]"Coin clarity" means that a coin name appears in the translation so that the reader can know a coin is in the original context.

confusion. Inaccuracy in any of these issues is problematic, as the following critique demonstrates. In addition to the four key criteria, three other criteria are more debatable but can be negative factors in a translation: coin name familiarity,[45] text amplification, and the need for a marginal note. The following chart compares the six possible translation methods using seven criteria in order to determine the best approach.

	Formal: transliteration	Formal: ancient coin name	Formal: modern coin name	Dynamic: a type of coin	Dynamic: a coin	Dynamic: monetary value
Name accuracy	✓	X	X	—	—	—
Coin clarity (it is a coin)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Historical clarity	✓	✓	X	X	X	X
Monetary worth accuracy	—	—	X	✓-	—	✓
Coin name familiarity	X	X	✓	—	—	—
No additions to the text	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X
No marginal note needed	X	X	X	X	X	✓

[In this chart, "✓" = advantage, "X" = disadvantage, and — = not applicable.]

1. Formal Equivalence: Transliteration

This method uses transliteration. Four advantages come with this technique—more than any of the other five methodologies. First, it is the only method to correctly name the ancient coins. It is a common practice today in translation to retain the name of currency used in the original language, such as the Chinese yuan, Japanese yen, Mexican peso, and US dollar. Thus, transliterating NT coin terms follows this practice. Second, this method indicates the object in the biblical text is a specific coin, which is important for properly understanding the text. Third, this method retains the historical flavor of the text. Fourth, transliterating does not add to the biblical text. The ancient coin with a specific numismatic value had clear meaning in the first century AD and in the biblical text. With a transliteration, the reader understands that a specific foreign coin term was used even if he or she ignores the marginal note.

The chart above has an "X" by "coin name familiarity" and "no marginal note needed." One could argue this method does a disservice to the reader because the common reader will have no idea as to the meaning or value of this unknown Roman, Greek, or Jewish coin. A marginal note is needed to explain the meaning and value of the term. Yet, it seems more likely that a person will look at a marginal explanation of the meaning of an unknown

[45]"Coin name familiarity" means the reader will likely be familiar with the term, such as "penny."

coin term than the reverse. In other words, if a coin description is in the text (such as "a copper coin"), one is probably less likely to look up the actual ancient coin term in the marginal note.

The marginal note needs several important pieces of information. It should give the coin's value related to other coins of the day, its monetary value in ancient and modern time, and a reference to the difference in buying power in ancient and modern time. However, there are three challenges with marginal notes: (1) readers tend to ignore marginal notes, (2) readers may erroneously think marginal notes are part of inspired Scripture, and (3) notes must be regularly updated for accuracy.

One transliteration is problematic and worth noting, but this is an anomaly in this methodology. Readers commonly mistake the "talent" in Matthew 25:14–30 as a special ability like singing. Due to this possible misunderstanding, it might be helpful to accurately transliterate it ("talant" rather than "talent") and to add a descriptive term, such as "talant of money" (since readers may not catch the spelling difference of talant versus talent).

2. Formal Equivalence: Using an Ancient Coin Name

What about using another ancient coin term that is possibly more well-known than the term in the text? This method avoids the problem of anachronism. Using "shekel" (ESV, NASB95, NJB, RSV) or "four-drachma coin" (LEB, NET, TNIV, NIV84) instead of "stater" in Matthew 17:27 certainly retains the historical flavor. Also, this methodology keeps coin clarity since a specific coin (or coins) was used in the text.

This method has three benefits as the transliteration method but one additional problem. The glaring problem: the terms are wrong. In Matthew 17:27 Jesus said στατῆρα. He did not say "shekel" or "four-drachma coin." One might argue that it is more likely that Jesus actually said the Hebrew name שֶׁקֶל (shekel). Yet, the Greek word for שֶׁקֶל is σίκλος, as seen in the LXX translation of 1 Samuel 13:21 and 2 Kings 7:1, 16, 18. One's translation of the NT should be of the Greek words themselves rather than a guess at the underlying Aramaic or Hebrew actually spoken at that time.

There is a unique challenge with using "shekel." The value of shekel today is much different from its value in Jesus' day. Back then a shekel was roughly equivalent to 1 stater, 1 tetradrachm, 4 drachmae, or 4 denarii (four days' wages for a common day laborer): the equivalent to $232 in the US today. Yet, modern Israel's revival of the shekel in 1980 was as a coin of much smaller value: the equivalent of 29¢ in US currency.[46] So, since the modern shekel is a different coin of much less value than the ancient shekel, a marginal note is needed to explain the difference in worth of the two coins.

[46]"The Universal Currency Converter," http://www.xe.com/ucc/. The modern shekel is divided into 100 agorat. Of course, the modern shekel value is a moving target. In the 1970s inflation was climbing up towards 1,000% annually in Israel, but in recent decades it has been kept under control.

3. Formal Equivalence: Using a Modern Coin Name

This solution employs the term for a similar coin in the receptor language. It has three advantages: (1) coin clarity, since the reader understands a particular coin was used in the original text, (2) familiarity, since readers will likely be familiar with the modern coin term, and (3) no additions to the biblical text. Yet, familiarity results in the first of four problems with this methodology: it is anachronistic. The uninformed reader may think that Jesus actually used pennies (minus the picture of Abraham Lincoln, of course). Some people may serve the Almighty Dollar, but it is not the currency of the Bible or heaven. A modern equivalent coin term loses the historical setting of Scripture. Eugene Nida made an important observation about the need for preserving the historical nature of Scripture:

> It must be recognized also that, while translation is intended to make the original text understandable and in a certain sense indigenous, it is by no means desirable to translate so as to give the reader the impression that the events described happened yesterday or just across the street. The historical nature of the Scriptures, their witness that certain events occurred at particular places and times in the world's life, and under conditions that existed, warrants the retention of such terms as preserve the historical atmosphere. For this reason, transliteration of a term, when it appears necessary, may be an advantage.[47]

Interestingly, Nida did not follow his own advice with numismatic terms, instead suggesting transliteration for only "talent" (sic) and saying "shekel" is a good transliteration of στατήρ and ἀργύριον, which it is not.[48]

The second and third problems are related: both the coin names and the monetary values are inaccurate. For instance, an assarion was worth 1/16 of a denarius, and a denarius was a full day's wage for a common laborer. Yet, fourteen of the Bibles in this study use "penny" (CEV, ESV, GNT, GWT, CSB, LEB, NCV, NEB, NET, NIV84, NRSV, RSV, TNIV) or "cent" (NASB) in Matthew 10:29. Translators Newman and Stine advocate using the smallest coin in circulation, such as "penny" or simply using the dynamic translation "a small coin."[49] Nida advocated using "penny."[50] Yet, an assarion was not a cent, nor was it the smallest value coin in circulation. The lepton was considerably smaller (worth 1/8 of an assarion).

[47]Eugene A. Nida, *Bible Translating* (New York: American Bible Society, 1947), 314.

[48]Nida, *Bible Translating*, 328–30.

[49]M. Newman, and P.C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, Logos Edition (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 307.

[50]Nida compiled a helpful—but now dated—table of translation and marginal note suggestions for coins, weights, and measures. Nida, *Bible Translating*, 328–30.

Four translations use "farthing" (KJV, NEB, TNT, YLT) to translate kodrantēs in Matthew 5:26.[51] They illustrate a problem with this methodology if the translation is not continually updated. The TNT and KJV use seventeenth-century equivalent coins, most of which were current in their day but are obsolete terms today. Today these translations simply substitute one unknown term with another one. Who knows what is a farthing is today? A marginal explanatory note is imperative for these translations. So, why use seventeenth-century terms at all? It is a confusing and unnecessary step.

Interestingly, Matthew and Luke record Jesus addressing the subject of settling with one's opponent to avoid debtor's prison on different occasions. Matthew 5:25–26 is in the Sermon on the Mount, and Luke 12:58–59 is during the journey to Jerusalem. In Matthew 5:26 Jesus said the person will not be released until he paid the last kodrantēs; whereas, Luke 12:59 has lepton. If these two different terms are translated as "penny" or "cent" as do the majority of translations consulted in this study, the reader will not know that two different terms are used, one of which (kodrantēs) is worth twice as much as the other (lepton). Normally when Jesus repeated a lesson He used some differences in wording. One could argue that both translations are fine since the point of Jesus' illustration was the entire debt or payment must be made, but these two numismatic terms refer to two different coins, so accuracy is sacrificed by using "penny" or "cent."

The fourth problem with this methodology is the need for a marginal note to give the actual historical name of the coin (the transliteration) for the sake of accuracy. However, since the reader is already familiar with the modern coin name used in the translation of the biblical text, there is little incentive to look at the marginal note. Thus, this translation methodology sacrifices accuracy and historical context for familiarity, which does a disservice to the reader.

4–5. Dynamic Equivalence: Using a Type of Coin or Simply: "Coin"

The next two methodologies have the following two disadvantages in common. First, they lose all sense of historical clarity because they are so generic in coin terms. Second, a marginal note is needed for the reader to have an idea as to the name and value of the coin.

They differ in two categories. First, using a type of coin does give some monetary worth accuracy. For instance "silver coins" for δραχμάς in Luke 15:8 (NASB) or "two little copper coins" for λεπτὰ δύο in Mark 12:42 (GNT) both covey some sense of worth; thus, the fourth methodology gets a ✓- in this category. In contrast, just using "coins" in the fifth method (GWT for δραχμάς in Luke 15:8), gives no sense of their value. The fifth method has the advantage over the fourth method in that it gives no additions to the

[51]Nida suggested using "farthing," since that coin was in use when he compiled the chart. It was worth ¼ of a penny in British currency; however, after 1961 it was no longer legal tender. Nida, *Bible Translating*, 329.

biblical text. However, both of these Dynamic Equivalent methods have no benefits that outweigh their drawbacks.

6. Dynamic Equivalence: Using the Monetary Value

It is tempting to translate the ancient coin into a modern monetary equivalent. Having no need for a marginal note is good, but this method has four problems. First, it ignores the name of the coin(s) in the text. Second, it has no coin clarity. The reader has no idea that a coin was used in the text—missing an exact picture of what really happened. A denarius was a specific and well-known coin in Jesus' day. For instance, in Matthew 18:28 ἑκατὸν δηνάρια is rendered "a few thousand dollars" (NLiv), "hundreds of dollars" (GWT), "a few pounds" (GNT, NEB), and "a few dollars" (NCV). The marginal note of the NIV has "that is, a few dollars." Craig Blomberg notes "'a few dollars' is misleadingly small."[52] Third, this methodology is anachronistic since it gives the monetary translation in modern US currency. The historical setting is lost. Fourth, none of the value calculations using this methodology in this study are accurate. The amounts vary greatly, and even if their values were correct for their year of publication (but they are not), the following year the values would be wrong due to the daily fluctuating value of the dollar (as noted above). So, using a current monetary amount in the biblical text is meddling with the timelessness of Scripture. Each numismatic term had a fixed monetary value in the first century AD, and in ancient times values changed very slowly through the years. In contrast, the monetary value of coins and currency in the last few hundred years has changed dramatically.

Would it help to state a generic monetary value instead of a specific amount? Thus, δηναρίου in Matthew 20:2 (the eleventh-hour worker parable) can be translated as "the usual daily wage" (NEB, GWT) or by a similar phrase (CEV, NET, NLiv, NRSV, Voice). The reader must then estimate the exact amount. Although there is no need to constantly update a generic amount, the other problems with this method remain the same. There is no coin clarity, no historical clarity, and it adds to the biblical text, regardless of whether the amount is specific or generic in the translation. For instance, the reader has no idea that a specific coin appears in the text of Matthew 20:2 when the translation simply says "the usual daily wage." There is textual confusion for the reader, who may think Jesus actually said this generic value or term, but he did not. Rather, Jesus was numismatically specific. One ought to know that the text mentions a specific coin (or coins) rather than just a value. So, this method lacks specificity. Additionally, although not imperative for understanding the value, this methodology ought to have a marginal note to give the coin term used in the text as well as a notation of the difference in buying power today versus in the first century AD.

[52]Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 of The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 283.

7. A Combination Methodology

Rarely, a translation will combine two of the above methods. For instance, the GNT renders δηναρίου in Matthew 20:2 as "the regular wage, a silver coin a day." It gains benefits and loses some problems by wedding methodologies. For instance, this example overcomes the problem of coin clarity. However, this practice is an amplification of the text rather than a straight translation, and this is its main problem. It harms the original flow of the text. Jesus said to Peter (Matt 17:27), "You will find a stator" rather than, "You will find a stator that is roughly the equivalent of a shekel with a value differential of plus or minus 5%." Since this translation clearly contains words not in the original text, how does the reader know what is original and what was added? A marginal note is not needed because the note was added to amplify the biblical text. Italics or brackets could be used for added words, but the example cited above does not use them. Thus, it seems best to leave any textual amplification to a Bible specifically dedicated to this task.[53]

Conclusion

Numismatic terms in the New Testament are a unique challenge in Bible translation. How does the English translator communicate that a specific coin was used, give a comparable monetary worth today, and retain historical clarity—so the modern reader knows the event happened in a culture 2,000 years ago, possibly thousands of miles away? Most modern Bible translations today are inconsistent in their approach and insufficient in their NT numismatic translations. Methodologically-consistent and accurate translations are needed. The above evaluation demonstrates that the transliteration of NT numismatic terms along with an explanatory marginal note has the most benefits, and its two problems are alleviated by providing good marginal notes. It appears to be the best method for preserving the name accuracy, coin clarity, historical clarity, and no textual additions in order to properly understand the meaning and message of the text.

The marginal note is crucial for the reader's understanding. However, the challenge is to entice the reader to read the marginal note, and this is a problem not easily resolved. Using a transliteration, thus giving an ancient coin term unfamiliar to most readers, is more likely to result in the reader consulting the marginal note than would occur if a familiar (but misleading) modern coin term or description is used.

The problem of translating NT numismatic terms will not be resolved anytime soon. As translations proliferate and translation committees continue to work in isolation from each other, the problem will continue. Translating biblical weights and measures is a similar problematic area whose solution is likely the same as the one proposed to best translate numismatic

[53]See, The Amplified New Testament (La Habra, CA: Lockman, 1958).

terms. Hopefully this paper will inspire dialogue and continued research in these needed areas.