NUMISMATICS, METROLOGY, AND THE APOCALYPSE

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NUMISMATICS, METROLOGY, AND THE APOCALYPSE

Signposts Towards A Responsible Hermeneutic of the Economic Crisis of Revelation 13:15-17

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Numismatics, Metrology, and the Apocalypse: Signposts Towards a Responsible Hermeneutic of the Economic Crisis of Revelation 13:15-17

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This work is dedicated to Dr. Tom Philipps

Thank you for teaching me the greatest lessons to live by: to never be afraid of asking questions, to have the wisdom and humility to accept the answers, and the courage to face what it may cost you.

You will always be my Professor, my mentor, and my friend.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue 5
Introduction 8

Chapter One-Social Location of Revelation 13:15-17 13

Chapter Two-Iconographic Sensitivities 24

Chapter Three-The History of Roman Provincial Coinage 32

Chapter Four-Numismatic Reforms from Augustus to Nero 48

Chapter Five-The Elusive Denarius 68

Conclusion 74

Epilogue 78

Bibliography 81
Index 84
PROLOGUE

I gaze upon the rich tapestry of our history stretching back eon upon eon, to a time when humans first began to record their thoughts, ideas, and most importantly, their visions of the future. Even then, in the earliest attempts to record a visual history, we find evidence of a precocious people grasping to comprehend the future, the unknown, and the end of time. It is in this primitive time that many of the end-time stories were birthed, stories that have endured to the present.

This cultural obsession with the end times has hardly subsided over the millennia. In fact, the apocalyptic fervor has only become stronger and the fires of end-times excitement are continually stoked by modern cinema, popular literature and television. The air, it would seem, is more abuzz than usual as we creep closer toward the year 2012, when many speculate the world will cease to exist. Everyone seems to have an opinion on the subject. My own grandmother even recently asked me what I thought about the world ending, and I reassured her that
everything would be fine and simply encouraged her not to listen to the rhetoric flying around.

The root of contemporary apocalyptic fervor can often be traced (sometimes indirectly) to the Book of Revelation. It is both the epicenter and the ripe field in which various end-time scenarios are harvested and perpetuated. One can hardly turn on the television without stumbling onto a History Channel special about the subject and unfortunately, the information propagated (not only in these shows but popular writings as well) is grossly reckless, irresponsible and sometimes even dangerous.

Using the term dangerous to describe the Book of Revelation is certainly appropriate, due in part to the countless men and women who have hijacked the book’s message for their own twisted personal gain (David Koresh and Jim Jones, just to name a few). It is terribly unfortunate that many of these end-time messianic cults used the Book of Revelation to do considerable harm. But it is more than just a handful of mentally unstable leaders who have done this book a great disservice. It can be easily argued that much of what is referred to as “pop culture Christianity,” with its deep evangelical roots, has been heavily influenced by popular works such as the Left Behind series and the like. These teachings, though extremely popular, have done an extreme disservice to the church and its theology on the Apocalypse and modernity. And this is what drives me to address such a complicated and volatile subject matter.

My goal is simply to diffuse some of the toxic clouds that have unjustly enveloped the Book of Revelation. Over the years it has become a small but
personal quest of mine to educate others and offer hermeneutical alternatives instead of simply treating the Apocalypse as a repository for insane end-time predictions. Many, I have found, are relieved to discover that there are in fact alternatives that don’t involve radical correlations between the images of the Apocalypse and modern events.

Elisabeth Shussler Fiorenza in her commentary on the Apocalypse warns the new reader of what she calls the division of labor within biblical scholarship. Either you will find yourself in the historicist exegetical camp, with the enormous task of determining what a text meant within the socio-historical context where it was birthed, or you will find yourself in the pastoral camp, with the equally difficult task of articulating what a text means for today’s church, often with disastrous results. Fiorenza challenges the reader to respect the text within its historical context and to give it space for that particular voice to speak freely without simply reading into it what we wish it to say.

Fiorenza is right to say, “The rights of the text must be respected, and the chasm between the world of the text and that of the present day interpreter must be maintained.”¹ In order to move beyond the stereotypes of the Apocalypse and to begin to see it as the truly transformative text that it is, we must understand the world in which it was penned and that is exactly the aim of this project.

INTRODUCTION

John's Apocalypse contains some of the most well-known images in the New Testament. Even people who don't consider themselves to be religious are quick to recognize the images and symbols of the Apocalypse. Many of the controversial images can be found within the 13th chapter of the Apocalypse, including the mark of the beast, the number of the beast, and the ominous passage restricting Christians from buying or selling. It is this last image that has caught my attention more than most, not only because I am fascinated to explore the cultural events surrounding this statement, but also because of the outlandish theories I have heard from close friends involving bar codes, subcutaneous implants, and much more.

The economic crisis of Revelation 13:15-17 will be the focus of this paper. As mentioned in the prologue, I will do my best to respect the chasm between the world of the text and that of the reader; therefore, I shall be operating from a historicist position in an attempt to recreate the socio-political climate in which this work was penned.
Specifically, I will argue that Revelation 13:15-18 describes a past situation in which economic transactions were disrupted for Jews and Jewish Christians living in Palestine and Asia Minor, resulting in an economic crisis unique to this area. This crisis found its roots in events prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., specifically by a series of numismatic reforms initiated by Nero. The author of Revelation, most likely a Jewish Christian, was describing the use of coins in Palestine and Asia Minor after the destruction of the temple rather than prophesying future eschatological economic catastrophe. The economic catastrophe in John's Apocalypse was anticipated and came to fruition in the author's lifetime.

Numismatics of first century Palestine and Asia Minor are the keys that unlock the mystery of the ominous passage. However, any explorer of the world of ancient coins is quick to learn that rarely is one just dealing with coins alone. One is essentially opening up a Pandora's Box of parallel research disciplines that all have something to contribute to the historical reconstruction of the period.

In addition to discussing the nuances of several types of ancient coinage, I will also spend a great deal of time exploring distribution patterns, metrology of silver coins, Roman assimilation practices, and minting procedures within the eastern Roman Empire. All of these topics are intricately related in my argument that the economic crisis of Revelation 13:15-18 was the result of a series of Neronian economic reforms in Palestine and Asia Minor prior to the temple destruction.
Though my interpretation is hardly groundbreaking, I have yet to find any serious scholarly research attempting to tie Revelation 13:15-18 to a specific historical situation. This is certainly surprising, considering what we know of Roman coinage and what John offers in this passage in terms of information of origin. It seems clear that John is describing a situation in which economic transactions required the use of an iconic coin that most likely bore the image of a Roman emperor.

Chapter One will deal with the dating and social location of the Book of Revelation and early Jewish/Christian economic relations with Rome. Evidence offered will serve to establish a terminus post quem of the book, which I will situate post-70 C.E., after Nero and Domitian’s economic reforms were established. By exploring the internal literary evidence and persecution accounts given by Pliny and examining various manifestations of Roman rule and the Imperial Cult, I will argue for an authorship date during the reign of Domitian. My goal in Chapter One is to situate John’s Apocalypse during a period of great economic prosperity, a prosperity that would challenge the beliefs of early Jewish Christians to the core.

Chapter Two will serve to examine the evolving attitudes of Jews and Jewish Christians toward iconography and their interpretations of the second commandment. Using archaeological data from various sites, my goal is to explain how it came to be that the Jews and Christians came to prefer the Tyrian shekel as their principle coinage (though it, too, contained an iconic stamp) over provincial
Roman coins. By the end of Chapter Two we can begin to recognize the pieces of the economic crisis that was about to take place.

Chapter Three entails the detailed examination of specific coins, production, minting, and circulation practices in the Eastern Empire. By understanding the creation and flow of money, we can begin to understand the unique economic situations that Palestine and Asia Minor found themselves in. This unique position was one of relative religious freedom and the right to use coinage void of Roman iconography.

Chapter Four involves the history of economic reforms, beginning with Augustus and ending with Nero. My goal in this chapter is to help the reader understand the stunning success Augustus had in refashioning, and essentially reshaping, all the coinages of the Mediterranean, only to be contrasted with the stunning failure of Nero that nearly bankrupted the empire. Nero narrowly avoided this massive catastrophe by a series of numismatic debasements and the re-tariffing of Roman currencies, which resulted in the economic crisis for Jews and Christians described by John.

Chapter Five focuses on the seminal work by Dr. David Walker. By studying the metrological (silver) content of many of the prior coins mentioned, Walker’s work serves as the smoking gun that gives solid evidence of the economic reforms initiated by Nero.

Chapter Six serves as the integration of all the data offered in this paper thus far and introduces the reader to the disappearance of the Tyrian shekel and the necessity to do so after the devaluing of the Roman denarius. Suddenly Jews and
Christians found themselves in a position in which they could not buy or sell without handling coins with the portrait, name, and regnal year of the Roman emperor. As output of the Tyrian shekel dwindled, Syria and Palestine were flooded with new currencies, rendering the shekel nearly impossible to find. Within a decade, the face of Palestinian money abruptly changed and joined the rest of the empire, and suddenly the people in Palestine were unable to buy or sell without the coins of the Roman “beast.”
affairs and have the benefit of an abundance of many good things...” Luke reports
in Acts 18:2, though, that a few years later Claudius himself ordered all Jews to
leave Rome.

**Dating**

“If we do not understand the historical context, we will have trouble
understanding the text itself. If we fail to understand both text and context, we risk
misapplying the text’s message in our lives. In the case of no other book of the
New Testament has an error in dating led to more misinterpretations and
misapplications than the Book of Revelation.”

Any biblical scholar is more than aware of the complexities one has to engage in
when dealing with authorship and dating of the biblical texts. We are aware that
the word “exact” is never to be found on the lips of scholars, but at the same time
evidence is clear in creating a more than plausible locale for such matters,
specifically the penning of John’s Apocalypse.

Though the conclusions on the matter vary considerably, the general consensus
seems to fall into two streams of thought. The first argues for an authorship date
shortly before the destruction of the temple or shortly afterward. The second
group argues for a date during the mid-nineties, during the reign of Domitian. By
using evidence from the text itself, the imperial cult, and Pliny the Younger, I will
make the case for the later date.

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2 Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.6.2
3 Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and
Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 83,84,86.
4 Gary North, Introduction, “Date of John’s Apocalypse”
www.commentary.net/freebooks/docs/a__pdfs/kgbj.pdf
The majority group situates the date of the Apocalypse during Domitian’s reign in the mid to late nineties and views Domitian as a persecutor of Christians, though a few others recently have come to see his reign in more benevolent terms. The strongest evidence for the later date comes from the testimony of Irenaeus, whose comment refers to the date during 95-96 C.E under the reign of Domitian. Since there is little evidence of a date beyond 95 C.E., it is best to consider the evidence toward a later date.

**Internal Evidence**

Textual evidence for a later date is due in part to the use of the name Babylon, considered to be the second destroyer of Jerusalem, in reference to Rome. Scripture and historical references elude towards the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., therefore pushing most scholars toward a date after 70 C.E. Also, the use of the name Babylon for Rome and the use of temple language for events other than the physical temple are internal indicators of a date after 70 C.E. Ambiguous passages with relevance for the date can be interpreted plausibly against the background of Domitian’s reign.

Despite the evidence for a later date, those who argue for a pre-temple destruction date do so based on three points worth mentioning. The first is that the reference to the temple in Revelation 11:1-2 and the prediction of the extent of the Gentiles’ trampling argues that it must have been written before 70 C.E. Second,
the enumeration of the number of the beast as 666 (or the textual variant 616) indicates Nero as the intended man spoken of in Revelation 13:8. Last, the enumeration of the seven kings in Revelation 17:9-10 makes Nero the fifth or sixth, Galba the sixth or seventh and Otho the seventh or eighth, suggesting a date shortly after Nero’s death but before the civil wars of 68-69 are settled. Indeed this would have been a time in which an anti-Roman provincial like John might have expected the beast to have devoured the whore. It’s also important to note that though the Book of Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian, it still retained many of the Neronian traditions and influences within the texts despite the reductive process.

A History of Persecution?

Internal evidence hints at a situation of relative peace and selective persecution with an imminent expectation of it intensifying on a larger scale. We are acutely aware of the Neronian persecutions in Rome, but evidence is unclear if they extended and Asia Minor, where the churches of the Apocalypse were located. It is certainly possible that John anticipated this outbreak of persecution in Rome as the first step of a wave of persecutions that would affect all the empire.

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7 It is a point easily explained by the significance of the Nero Myth, in which Nero was believed to be in exile plotting his eventual return.
Rampant persecution under Domitian is more difficult to prove; however, it is possible and certainly supported by documentary evidence by writers after his reign.\(^\text{10}\) Though consistent persecution during his reign was not a hallmark, John certainly may have foreseen the coming storm clouds and expected imminent persecution.

Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to Trajan in 112-113 C.E. that sheds considerable light on the social setting of Revelation 13. In this unique letter we find Pliny asking advice from the emperor on how to proceed with the prosecution of those charged with being Christian. Pliny had a high regard for precedents, and though he had most likely heard of trials against Christians and assumed there were customary penalties, he had no precedents available. Perhaps he was setting one here. It was self-evident to Pliny that being a Christian was a punishable offense, particularly because it involved the refusal to sacrifice to the emperor and gods of the empire. It is a matter-of-fact account that depicts the very sort of encounter for which John prepares his congregations in his Apocalypse. Pliny wrote:

The method I have observed toward those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked whether they were Christians; if they admitted it, I repeated the question twice, and threatened them with punishment; if they persisted, I ordered them at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved correction. [Those who denied ever being Christian] repeated after me and [made] invocations to the Gods, and offered religious rite with wine and incense before your statue (which for that purpose I had ordered to be brought,

together with those of the gods), and even reviled the name of Christ. [Those who admitted they were once Christians, but now recanted] worshipped your statue and the image of the gods, uttering imprecations at the same time against the name of Christ.\footnote{David, 869.}

It would seem that Pliny expresses interest in reclaiming large numbers of people who have converted, as well as reviving traditional religious rites.

This is the oldest surviving hard evidence of accounts of legal prosecutions (unlike Nero’s which, didn’t involve trials) of Christians on the charge of professing faith in Christ. A simple act, the offering of a little incense and wine, combined with the words \textit{anathema Christos}, could get one off the hook. John, however, insists that the testimony of Jesus be maintained to the end, that the Christian not deny the name of Christ. Compromise would result in the death of the testimony of Jesus being the liberating word contained in the cross and resurrection, even if the church survived in a new form, as another religion contributing to the legitimacy of Rome and the status quo. It is a great testimony to John that the clash between the confession of Christ and loyalty to emperor that he foresaw became a reality just fifteen years after he wrote Revelation.

In light of the evidence offered, it would make sense for a later date rather than earlier. Though John’s exile to Patmos could have taken place under Nero, it fits better under Domitian, when forms of persecution for refusal to participate in emperor worship were increasing. The letters in Revelation suggest that Jewish Christians were tempted to escape persecution by seeking some form of identification with the Jewish synagogues, which were exempt from emperor
worship, and that Gentile Christians were tempted to compromise with trade guilds and even the emperor cult to escape it. Such a situation is more likely to have occurred close to the end of the first century rather than earlier.\footnote{\textsuperscript{12}}

\textit{Manifestations of Roman Rule: The Imperial Cult}

Jewish tradition always held a deep concern for idolatry and syncretism. Despite these concerns, the Roman Imperial cult influenced religious practice on numerous counts. Philo offers several written examples, including this account at the temple in Jerusalem:

\begin{quote}
Indeed so religiously did he [Caesar Augustus] respect our interests that supported by well-nigh his whole household he adorned our temple through the costliness of his dedications, and ordered that for all time continuous sacrifice of whole burnt offerings should be carried out every day at his own expense as a tribute to the most high God. And these sacrifices are maintained to the present day...\footnote{\textsuperscript{13}}
\end{quote}

Despite anecdotal evidence of compromise, there were limits to how far Jews would go in honoring Rome and Caesar, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Revelation presupposes that Christians were being required to participate to some degree in the imperial cult (13:4-8, 15-16, 14:9-11, 15:2, 19:20), including...
emperor worship as divine beings (something that also took place prior to Domitian). “It’s possible that Christians in Rome were required to recognize Nero’s deity, but that is not the occasion for his persecution of them. He persecuted them because he blamed the great fire of Rome on them. In contrast, in the Apocalypse persecution arises because of refusal to worship the ungodly king.”

An essential part of understanding the book of Revelation (and my thesis) relies on the basic understanding of the scope and ideology of Roman rule. Many popular prophecy advocates keep looking to the near future for a beast and the fruition of a one world empire because they have a severely deficient understanding of and familiarity with the perception of the Roman Empire by its citizens.

The tentacles of the Roman imperial cult stretched far and wide as described by John. Contrary to popular thought, the Imperial cult practices were not mandated, but they arose as a natural response to the enormous power wielded by the god-like emperor. Since his perceived powers were comparable to the gods, it seemed only fitting to express one’s gratitude by revering him with temples, offerings, and sacrifices.

The imperial cult was embedded in the local practices, and deities and effigies of the emperor were often found next to the sacred spaces, emphasizing

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their connectedness. The emperor was not explicitly a god, but rather was the vessel by which the traditional gods established order and showered their gifts on humanity. Numismatics of this period are clear in their quasi deification of the emperor.

The imperial cult was extremely active in the province of Asia Minor, as archaeological evidence from each of the seven cities attests. During Domitian’s reign, when the provinces had experienced a surge of prosperity, a massive new temple was erected to Domitian, with a cult statue that stood twenty feet high. As they went about their daily business, Christians in these seven cities passed temples, shrines and altars representative of the imperial cult, and they witnessed the festivities marking important days and civic festivals. The Gentile Christians among them would have faced strong pressures to participate lest they arouse the ill-will of their neighbors and local elites.

John thus addresses a situation in which Christians stood in tension with their neighbors in ways similar to those encountered in Philippi and Thessalonica. The imperative to avoid all forms of idolatry and all worship of other gods would have meant conspicuous avoidance of participation in the ubiquitous imperial cult or in any rite that focused attention on another god besides the God of Israel. This would severely limit a Christian’s social, economic and political participation, since some pious rite adorned most gatherings, and almost every occasion involving a common meal included acknowledging the patron deity presiding at

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the meal. It would mean a voluntary resignation of access to the economic advantages of full participation in the trade guilds. It would reduce the number of non-Christian friends, not just in the social sense but also in the sense of business associates who would increase Christians’ access to prosperity and patrons who could provide protection and aid in the time of need. In addition, suspicion increased concerning the goals of this “atheistic” and “antisocial” group growing in the midst of the city. Some voices in the churches sought to minimize and reduce these tensions; John sought to escalate them.

We know that the influence of the imperial cult was especially strong in Asia Minor, the area where the seven churches of the Apocalypse are located. The practice of emperor worship arose out of the idea that some human beings were closer to being gods than others. In this type of thinking there is no substantial gulf between humanity and the gods. It is a very different point of view from the Jewish idea of the radically “other” character of Yahweh.

Given such a mentality, it was natural for the citizens of Asia Minor to express appreciation to the emperor for the benefits of his rule by honoring him as a god. The tremendous accomplishments of Augustus, especially, made him appear superhuman. The Apocalypse attacks this mentality bitterly. The implication is that God is the source of all power and that human accomplishments are never to be divorced from the aid given them by divine providence.¹⁷

What I have done in this chapter is to situate the Apocalypse during a period of great economic prosperity during the Domitian reign. The newfound abundance enjoyed by the many trade guilds and businesses spurred the influence of the imperial cult far and wide, placing the Christians of Asia Minor and Palestine in a precarious dilemma. The economic crisis foreseen by the author of the Apocalypse found its roots in the Roman coins which generally bore the image of the emperor as divine (though I will argue that iconic coins of the emperors were not common in Palestine, only furthering their economic dilemma). Refusal to use such coins at least would inhibit severely one’s ability to buy or sell in Palestine and Asia Minor. Such a refusal by John and his readers would not be surprising, since the emperor was often portrayed as a god on coins. The zealots rebelled against Rome in 66-70 A.D. and refused to carry, look at or manufacture coins bearing any sort of image. Their practice was based on a strict interpretation of the first commandment (Exodus 20:4) and on the belief that the images and inscriptions of Roman coins were idolatrous. By understanding the nuances of early Jewish and Christian attitudes towards iconography, we can begin to understand the magnitude of the economic crisis at hand in the Apocalypse.
CHAPTER TWO

-ICONOGRAPHIC SENSITIVITIES-

And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free man and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, and he provides that no will be able to buy or sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom, let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty six. –Revelation 13:15-18

I have argued that evidence, both internal and external, leans toward a plausible locale during the reign of Domitian. My work in this second chapter starts by narrowing and refining the discussion so that we may begin to examine the complexities of Revelation thirteen. I will do so by exploring three avenues of thought that are thoroughly intertwined. The first is to understand the
Jewish/Christian sensitivities towards Roman iconography. The second is to examine the significance of John’s apocalyptic community. The third is to understand the radicalization of attitudes towards numismatics of the first century for both Jews and Christians.

The only group of people known to have objected strongly to representations of the Roman emperor was Jews maintaining an extreme interpretation of the second commandment. “You must not make for yourselves a carved image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 8).

The historical record is not anomalous in recording widespread antagonism to Roman iconography. One can hardly imagine that the Jewish community in Rome, for example, where images of the Roman emperor were unavoidable, would have held strong aniconic sentiments, including objecting to the Roman denarius (which will be discussed in Chapter Four). In the first century Palestine, Jewish aniconic sensitivities did extend to the coins in their purses. The coins of the Roman procurators (with the possible exception of Pilate) avoid Roman imagery, employing instead vegetal types such as the lily and palm tree.18 Some of the coins of Herod Philip, Agrippa I, and Agrippa II bear the heads of the Roman emperor (or themselves), but these coins seem limited to non-Jewish areas.

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of the region. By contrast, Herodian coins minted in Jerusalem strictly avoided such iconography.¹⁹

These examinations will set the foundation for Chapter Three, in which specific coins of the first century will be examined in greater detail. All evidence will serve my argument that Revelation 13:17 was written by a Christian Jew (who maintained a radical interpretation of the second commandment) who was describing the use of coins in Palestine and Asia Minor after the destruction of the temple.

John's complaint that no one could buy or sell without the mark of the beast implies a new situation—a departure, if you will—from what the community was used to.²⁰ The comments in Revelation 13:17 allude toward a policy where suddenly Roman style coinage became the only available currency for everyday use. Such a development occurred only once in the Roman Empire during the Christian era: in Palestine in the early to late 60s of the first century of the Common Era.²¹

Changing Attitudes

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¹⁹ Andrew, Michael, P.P. 680, 685.

²⁰ Adela Yarboro Collins elaborates on the meaning of the mark left on one's forehead. For Collins, a Jew who handled unclean money was not only physically unclean but also tainted one's entire being, which manifested itself on the forehead.


The interpretation of the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-5), as with much of the Torah, developed in response to the problems encountered by Jews over the course of centuries of tumultuous history. Not only did Jewish attitudes toward images on coins change over time, at any given time Jews often disagreed among themselves. At many times in that history—and quite clearly during the first century C.E.—there was no single authoritative interpretation of Mosaic Law that was recognized by all Jewish (or Christian) communities.

The wording of the Torah doesn’t explain the development of Jewish antipathy to the images on coins. The clear and specific context of the biblical prohibition against making images is religious worship; the second commandment does not, on its face, proscribe images of people or animals in non-cultic situations. The human portrait of the earliest Jewish coins, the silver and bronze “Yehud” coins from the late Persian to early Ptolemaic periods, shows that, prior to the Seleucid period, the second commandment was not interpreted as extending to coins. 22 No historical evidence indicates that when Tyrian coins began to circulate (after 126 C.E.), their iconography would have been problematic.

The first indication of Jewish sensitivity to numismatic imagery appears with the advent of Hasmonean coinage. 23 It seems more plausible to locate the impetus for the Hasmonean iconography in politics and popular religious sentiment. With the demise of the Seleucids, numerous political entities in Syria signaled their

independence by minting their own coinage, of which both Tyre and the Hasmonean kingdom are examples. This declaration of independence was reinforced by using types that invoked Tyre’s history and contrasted the portrait of the king on the Seleucid coinage they replaced. The iconography of the coins of the Hasmonean monarchs, as heirs of the Maccabean rebellion against Antiochus IV, can be explained by the same logic. Political propaganda, not a rabbinic ruling, probably accounts for the iconography of the Hasmonean coinage.

That there was no widely accepted Jewish teaching against images on coins is also consistent with the fact that throughout the Hasmonean period, the Tyrian shekel circulated throughout Palestine. Tyrian silver had more than a century to establish its place before Jews began protesting about graven images that were not intended as cult objects.

The earliest known controversy over graven images occurred in 4 B.C.E., at the end of the reign of Herod the Great, when two Jewish teachers objected on religious grounds to a golden eagle placed over the main gate to the temple.

Josephus recounted this controversy:

These men, when they found that the king's distemper was incurable, excited the young men that they would pull down all those works which the king had erected contrary to the law of their fathers, and thereby obtain the rewards which the law will confer on them for such actions of piety; for that it was truly on account of Herod's rashness in making such things as the law had forbidden, that his other misfortunes, and this distemper also, which was so unusual among mankind, and with which he was now afflicted, came upon him; for Herod had caused such things to be made which were contrary to the law, of which he was accused by Judas and Matthias; for the king had erected over the great gate of the temple a
large golden eagle, of great value, and had dedicated it to the temple. Now the law forbids those that propose to live according to it, to erect images or representations of any living creature. So these wise men persuaded [their scholars] to pull down the golden eagle; alleging, that although they should incur any danger, which might bring them to their deaths, the virtue of the action now proposed to them would appear much more advantageous to them than the pleasures of life; since they would die for the preservation and observation of the law of their fathers; since they would also acquire an everlasting fame and commendation; since they would be both commended by the present generation, and leave an example of life that would never be forgotten to posterity; since that common calamity of dying cannot be avoided by our living so as to escape any such dangers; that therefore it is a right thing for those who are in love with a virtuous conduct, to wait for that fatal hour by such behavior as may carry them out of the world with praise and honor; and that this will alleviate death to a great degree, thus to come at it by the performance of brave actions, which bring us into danger of it; and at the same time to leave that reputation behind them to their children, and to all their relations, whether they be men or women, which will be of great advantage to them afterward.25

The audience of the teachers indicates that they might now have represented an established tradition on the matter at hand. "Their lectures on the law were attended by a large youthful audience, and day after day they drew together quite an army of men in their prime."26 Only with the ultimate success of this movement does it become appropriate to speak, as Josephus does, about Jewish custom that prohibits placing any image of a God, person, or animal "anywhere in the country."27

None of the known public controversies over images, however, involved coins. Those who objected to the eagle on Herod's temple do not seem to have

25Josephus, Antiquities, 17.6.2-3.
26Josephus, A.J., 1.23.2.
27Josephus., 2.10.4.
objected to his eagle on his coins.\textsuperscript{28} The public protests invariably involved the display of an image in a public place or in the center of mass assembly. In such contexts one could make the plausible argument that treating the image with any sign of respect constituted its worship. This line of reasoning cannot be easily extended to the use of coins for personal transactions in the marketplace, a distinctly unclean environment from the perspective of many Jews (Mark 7:4). Coin finds from the Jewish communities that include both Tyrian coins and coins with the image of the Roman emperor indicate that there was no general application of the second commandment to coins in the second temple period.

Although there was no official Jewish prohibition against certain images on coins, the coins of the Roman procurators do reflect a popular sensitivity to Roman images, regardless of context. The entire crisis over graven images described by Josephus involved symbols of Roman institutions and Roman hegemony. Moreover, Jews objected to Rome on grounds other than the second commandment. In particular, some Jews, urged by a certain Judas of Galilee and his followers, believed that subjecting oneself to the Roman census and Roman taxation was an act of apostasy (Acts 5:3-7). The Gospel story about paying tribute to Caesar shows that these two issues, the way coins are used and their imagery, had become intertwined.

As Josephus's accounts vividly illustrate, by the outbreak of the first Jewish revolt Jews violently disagreed among themselves about Roman institutions. So it

is hardly surprising to see a spectrum of attitudes toward coins in the archaeological and literary record. Some Jewish communities, such as Gamala, seem to have been comfortable with the Roman-style coinage. Other Jews, by contrast, came to abhor any coins bearing human or animal figures, including Tyrian shekels: The coinage of the Jewish revolt shows that by the 60s some Jews had become uncomfortable with the image of Melqart. Having no independent source of silver, the rebels would have had to melt down whatever coins they had on hand.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, several Tyrian shekels found at Masada were deliberately defaced, suggesting that they were not considered “national” or “Jewish” enough for the Masada zealots. It would appear that iconographic objections to Tyrian silver were central to the discussion by the Jewish rebels to mint new coins.\textsuperscript{30}

The Jewish Christians to whom John writes in Revelation 13:16-17 can be placed within this spectrum of Jewish attitudes toward coins with images. They can be seen as evidence that, for some Jews and Christians, Roman-style coins became objectionable, while the traditional Tyrian coinage remained, relatively speaking, acceptable.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 29-30.  
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 31.
CHAPTER THREE

-ROMAN PROVINCIAL COINAGE-

For let none of them have currency or weights or measures of their own; instead let them use ours-Cassius Dio

These were the words urged by Maecenas in a letter to Augustus. Cassius Dio’s rhetorical plea never influenced imperial policy because the polyglot populations of the Hellenic world had always dealt, and continued to deal, in a bewildering array of coins. City markets and rural fairs were filled with a variety of bronze coins carrying the name of the issuing city or a regional league that fostered the imperial cult. Such coins comprised most of the money in daily use, and they came in different sizes and denominations under a variety of standards.
Added to the mix were coins struck by such nicknames as “the basket bearing coin,” “silver of the Tyrian Stamp,” or “money of the Ptolemy.”

The general pattern during the period leading up to the great economic reforms of Nero (Julio-Claudian) would be defined by the gradual replacement of both civic and local Roman silver by the denarius, whose growth in production and circulation was the legacy of the civil wars of the late Republic. Denarii in most of the Roman Empire, including Italy, Sicily, Africa, and Achae, was the only silver currency offered. While the denarius dominated the silver currency in most of the empire, its function in the Roman east was a different story, and will be the focus of much discussion throughout this work. Its role in the east was severely restricted, and in some cases (as in Syria) was virtually non-existent. In these parts of the empire, silver was minted and distributed by its own provincial administrators. The local coinages of the provinces comprised not so much the civic issues which had typified the Hellenistic period, but rather a few local coinages which had previously been taken over by the Romans in the wake of their conquests and annexations.

The function of this chapter will be to introduce the major coins of Asia Minor and Syria pertaining to my thesis and to lay down the numismatic groundwork for the upcoming chapters. The main coinages of this chapter (and this thesis) will be the cistophorii of Asia Minor, the drachms and didrachms of Caesarea in Cappadocia, the tetradrachms of Antioch, and most importantly, the Tyrian shekel of Tyre (also referred to as pseudo-autonomous coinage).  

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Asia Minor and Syria Specifics

There were two predominant coinages minted in Asia Minor by the Roman authorities. One was the silver cistophorii and the other was an unusual bronze coin marked with the letters CA. Both coinages were produced on a remarkably large scale and would find their way into Syria. It is important to note here that these were the first to be minted on a new denominational scale, which foreshadowed numerous economic changes about to occur in both Asia Minor and Syria. Numismatists agree that these initial changes were the beginning of a Roman campaign to impose uniform coinage throughout the empire.

The large area encompassing the province of Syria contained a frustratingly complex number of regional coinages. These coins were noticeably different from their counterparts to the north, usually by being larger in size, and appeared to be struck on rougher flans from dies whose standards of engraving were much lower. If not for the Syrian habit of placing dates on coinages, it would have often been impossible to decide who or what was often depicted on them.

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32 Bronze coinage was referred to as aes (or asses). Raw bullion was referred to as rude aes. Numismatists still disagree strongly as to the meaning of the bronze “CA” (appears on other fractional coinage). Some argue it is a mark of the imperial cult meaning Comuniae Augusta and others argue that it is simply beyond knowing.

33 Burnett et al., Roman Provincial Coinage Vol., 23.
Evidence is clear that the principle coinage of Syria was essentially that of Antioch. The bronze coinage of Antioch was diverse in nature. It ranged from small bronze aes referring explicitly to the city to the large coins with a prominent SC in a wreath as the reverse type and Latin legends on the obverse. Similar coins were also made with longer legends in the wreath on the reverse. The coins seem therefore to range from purely civic local issues to ones produced under the Roman administration of the province, for which a military function has been deduced from the legionary countermarks they bear.

The rest of the coinage from the province falls into three main groups. The coinage of eastern Cilicia has a characteristic appearance. The flans were generally thinner and wider than those in Syria, and the obverses were often engraved in a similar localized style. These Cilician coinages were produced at only a few cities along the coast. All these coinages are very rare: None is known today apart from more than a handful of specimens, though new varieties are turning up more frequently for this than for any other part of the empire.

The bulk of coinage from the province comes from the second main area, of Seleucia and Phoenicia, which were principally coastal cities. There seems to have been a much greater proportion of “pseudo autonomous” coinage in Syria than in other regions. This is clear not just from the late date at which the imperial portrait was adopted in Syria, but also from the considerations that most of the

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34 Kenneth Harl, Andrew Burnett, and David Walker, three of the most respected numismatists in the world, belabor this point countless times throughout their works cited throughout this paper.
coinage of Apamea and all the coinage of Tyre lacked the imperial portrait.

"Pseudo autonomous" types account too, for a very large proportion of the
coinages of most of the other cities in the region.

The coinage reflects the changing political circumstances of that area.
Many of the eras by which the coinages were dated changed at the beginning of the
period; Caesarian eras are known from Antioch to Laodicea. The civil wars
sometimes find a reflection in the changing titles of the cities and dramatically in
the portraits of Antony, Marathus, Ptolemais and Tripolis; after the Ptolemaic
kingdom of Syria was restored to Cleopatra in 37 B.C.E., her portrait, too,
appeared at a number of cities in her new kingdom, though these issues are all rare.\(^\text{36}\)

The third area of Syrian coinage concerns the Jewish kingdom in the south,
which for much of the period in question was formally independent of the empire.
But in addition to the royal and tetrarchic issues, a number of other coinages were
made. One was struck by the Roman procurators, presumably at Jerusalem, and
there were also a number of civic issues. Such civic issues seem mostly to have been
made at times when the area was not under the authority of the Jewish rulers,
and most of them fall at the end of Nero’s reign. In addition, there are several
unusual issues, such as those from Caesarea Maritima and particularly Caesarea
Panyaes.\(^\text{37}\)

\(\text{Distribution and Scarcity}\)

\(^\text{35}\) Burnett et al., Roman Provincial Coinage Vol. 1, 145.

\(^\text{36}\) Andrew 134.

\(^\text{37}\) Andrew 25.
There were two relevant patterns of provincial silver in the provinces. First, the amount of coinage produced, even at the most important mints, was not very great in the east. This conclusion is based on the relative scarcity of most of these provincial coins today. Also, output cannot be argued on the basis of hoards, either, since there are very few hoards which include either provincial silver or both denarii and provincial silver. This is so partly because provincial coinage had highly localized circulation, but also because of the accidents of survival. In Asia, where denarii and local coinages do seem to have met, there is no significant body of hoard evidence. In this particular case, it has been suggested that the cistophorus was much more important than the denarius, because in 19-18 B.C., Augustan denarii minted in Asia were made from only 18 dies and the cistophorii from 71.38

A second factor to consider when working with silver provincial coinage is to know that their production was quite irregular. Cistophorii were produced in 39 B.C. and on two brief occasions under Claudius. The coins of Caesarea were often produced in reasonably large quantities, but again, only on irregular occasions. From Antioch, silver coinage was made during the first three years of Caligula’s reign, but nothing was produced until 50 C.E. Under Nero, coinage was produced in 54/55 and on a large scale between 60 and 64 C.E., and then again between 65 and 69 C.E., with issues continuing into the Flavian era.39

38 Ibid., 6.
The irregularity in minting seemed to be fairly typical of the period. The minting of the denarii was by no means regular throughout the Julio-Claudian period. It is well known that only small quantities of denarii were made in the reigns of Caligula and Claudius and the beginning of Nero’s reign until 64 C.E.

**Standards**

Silver currencies in the east were premised upon one of three standards. In the most widely used standard--known as the Attic or, in Syria, as the Tyrian--a silver drachma equaled the denarius, so the principle stater, a tetradrachma, was exchanged against four Roman denarii. Next in popularity was a drachma at three-quarters or the denarius, whereby the tetradrachma was valued at three denarii. This lighter standard went under various names: Rhodian or cistophoric in Asia Minor and Antiochene in Syria. In Egypt, a more debased standard prevailed and in A.D. 4 C.E. Claudius 1/2 tarifed the drachma at one quarter of a denarius, so that the tetradrachma was equal to one denarius.40

Three coins--the cistophorous of Asia, the tetradrachma of Antioch Tyre, and the drachma of Caesarea--acted as links between the denarius and the sundry provincial civic coins. These were the primary coins taken in taxation that could be converted via the denarius into Roman aurei or aes. The denarius could, in turn, be converted via regional staters into local bronze and silver fractions.41

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40 Ib., 114.
celebrated silver coins of the Greek homeland disappeared as repeated plundering of Greece and Macedon during the civil wars of the late Republic and the exhaustion of the mines at Laurium forced Athens to suspend coining her "new style" tetradrachma in the early thirties B.C.E. Roman officials simplified the silver currency in Greece by calculating taxes in the Attic drachma and collecting them in denarii, and unwieldy staters such as the Thessalian didrachma (exchanged at 1.5 denarii) were abolished.\footnote{John Davies, \textit{Roman Mines: Roman Mining in Europe} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 250-251.}

In 30 B.C. the cistophorus, although it had been debased and its minting discontinued during the Roman civil wars, was still the most important silver stater in Anatolia. Augustus put the cistophorus at the head of Asia's regional currency when he conducted a major re-coinage in tandem with the reform of the taxes of Asia. Mints at Ephesus and Pergamum collaborated in striking at least 15 to 20 million cistophorii in the decade from 28 to 18 B.C. Cistophorii had traditionally carried a laurel wreath enclosing the central design, but an idealized portrait of Augustus was substituted for the cista mystica on the obverse, and the Roman goddess Pax appears on the reverse. Dies for the later Augustan cistophorii, most likely cut by imperial engravers, bear impeccable Latin legends and reverse types with personal emblems of Augustus or major monuments in Asia or at Rome.

Augustus's first issue in 28 B.C.E. must have been struck from metal obtained by melting base Republican cistophorii and civic drachmae, for its fineness was noticeably below that of the cistophorii Antony had struck in 39 B.C.\footnote{John Davies, \textit{Roman Mines: Roman Mining in Europe} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 250-251.}
Antony’s cistophorii were permitted to circulate, not only because of their high quality, but also because they bore the portrait of the emperor’s sister Octavia. The large numbers and improved fineness of the later Augustan cistophorii testify to the return of prosperity and an infusion of fresh silver received in trade and from mines in Thrace and Anatolia. Cistophorii, given their iconography, likely entered circulation as distributions at festivals of the imperial cult held at the great centers of Asia and Bithynia. Cistophorii served the provinces’ needs for the next 150 years, and demands for new silver coin were met by minting more cistophorii rather than importing denarii, which apparently did not penetrate Asia Minor in any great numbers until the second century.⁴³

Throughout Anatolia and the eastern Aegean, cities and leagues continued to coin their own fractional silver coins on the Attic standard. In Anatolia the local Attic drachmae were complements to, rather than rivals of, the cistophorii. Upon the annexation of Cappadocia, Roman authorities continued striking drachmae that bore Latin legends with Greek inscriptions marked for regional use. Claudius introduced the didrachma that became the principal Caesarean denomination in the 90s. The mix of silver coins can be seen from the assorted fractions issued by Caesarea in 55-60. This array of denominations, minted on the Attic standard, provided convenient fractions for both the Attic tetradrachma and the cistophorous. The two standard Attic fractions—didrachma and drachma—were also equal to 2/3, 1/3, and 1/6 of the cistophorus.

⁴³ Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy, 100.
The second widely used coin in Asia Minor, the Caesarean drachma, tarried at one denarius, often has been considered a coin primarily struck to pay the eastern legions.\textsuperscript{44} Caesarea commanded the highway across Tarsus into Syria and Armenia and issued didrachma and drachmae during major Parthian wars, in 54-65 and 112-117. It is, however, more likely those Caesarean drachmae were paid to local contractors supplying the army, rather than as military payrolls. Hoards suggest that Cappadocian drachmae seldom found their way south of Tarsus into Syria.

In Syria, Augustus inherited a less complicated set of silver currencies. The two tetradrachma in widespread use were those of Tyre (a Levantine version on the Attic stater tarried at four denarii) and the baser coins of Antioch (tarried at three denarii). Silver bullion was imported to Syria from the Aegean world, and a significant proportion of this specie might have been diverted to the silver-consuming Parthian empire, because many Syrian cities lacked metal to maintain their silver coinages. The Nabatean sheiks east of the Jordan and Arab kings of Oshroene in upper Mesopotamia minted debased drachmae that passed as fractions of the tetradrachma of Roman Syria. Trajan in 111-114 and Marcus Aurelius in 166 improved, respectively, the silver coinages of Arabia and Mesopotamia by re-coining soon after annexation.\textsuperscript{45}

Down to 57/58 C.E Tyre struck her handsome tetradrachma, minted to a consistently high fineness (over 96 percent) and of good weight. It had been

\textsuperscript{44} Kenneth, 100.
\textsuperscript{45} Walker, The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian, 62-64.
prized as the trade coin of the Levant since the late second century B.C.E. Aramaic and Greek speakers viewed the city’s emblems, the obverse portrait of Melqart and the striding eagle on the reverse, as guarantees of “good silver of the Tyrian stamp.” Aniconic Jews accepted Tyrian tetradrachma in payment of temple dues, and caravan merchants of Palmyra, Bostra, and Petra popularized the coin from Aela on the Gulf of Awaba to Charax on the Persian Gulf.  

*Production*

The amount of coins produced is beyond counting, but the scale of their numbers can be sensed by the reserves accumulated by Tiberius (14-37); each emperor is credited with leaving 675 million denarii in the treasury, an extraordinary sum exceeding by over thirty times the greatest reserves of the Republican treasury. Taxation, imperial expenditure, and trade kept coins in perpetual motion between Rome and the provinces, but the cycle depended upon fresh infusions of coins to meet growing demand as well as to replenish dwindling stocks due to loss and the export of coins beyond the imperial frontiers. The minting of accumulated reserves and the re-minting of earlier coins were insufficient; demand was satisfied by the minting of gold and silver obtained through conquest, imports and mining. The constant, although hardly even, increase in the money supply contributed to mild long-term rises in prices, but

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46 Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy*, 193.
47 Suetonius Caligula. 37.2-3.
markets were always prey to violent short-term problems, as when Josephus reported that Syrian cities were glutted with gold and silver captured by Titus’s legions at Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The triumph of Roman coins in the provinces during the first and second centuries was largely due to the unprecedented supply of fresh metal available to the imperial government.

The imperial peace provided optimal conditions for the exploitation of mineral deposits so that the output from mines for the whole of classical antiquity peaked during the two centuries between the reigns of Augustus and Septimus Severus. A revolution in transportation during the imperial peace reduced costs and facilitated distribution of bullion and coin. The Roman state mobilized manpower on a scale hitherto unparalleled by a mix of inducement and compulsion. During big boom years, big mines generated tremendous sums of gold and silver that had immediate impact on the empire’s currency.

The imperial government, which struck coins in unprecedented amounts, achieved an equally remarkable success in the distribution of its money. For reasons of security, the manufacture of imperial money was concentrated initially at two central mints, Rome and Lugdunum, and after 64 C.E. Rome alone struck imperial coins. The imperial government was, in normal times, able to provide a steady flow of coins to the provinces for its own needs without a system of branch mints. Branch mints in the provinces were used only during civil wars—Vespasian

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48 See Josephus Bellum Judaicum 6.5.1.
49 Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy, 81.
issued aurei and denarii from a mint operating successively at Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus in 69 to 73. The imperial mint primarily met fiscal needs for coins to be disbursed in payrolls, purchases, and imperial gifts rather than for needs of commerce. Yet, even if only indirectly, the imperial mint fed the hunger of the capital, Italy, and western provinces for Roman coins as the pace of commercial and urban life quickened. Imperial expenditures put vast numbers of Roman coins into provincial markets, while taxation removed only part of this money back to Rome. Commerce dispersed the rest of the coins over a superb network of roads, canals, and sea-lanes linking the Roman world. A cycle of expenditure and commerce kept most Roman coins in perpetual circulation. The effectiveness of vast numbers of Roman coins penetrating provincial markets is undeniable and is documented by the rising use of Roman aurei and denarii, throughout the empire.

**Bronze Currencies of the East**

A medley of bronze fractional coins, much more varied than the silver staters, comprised most of the money circulating in the markets of the east. For over three centuries, Rome was spared the cost of coining and shipping bulky *aes* to the east, as Augustus continued the division of labor seen in the Hellenistic age, when royal and civic mints cooperated in supplying a bronze currency. At the former royal mints of Pergamum and Caesarea Mazaca in Asia Minor, Antioch in Syria, and Alexandria in Egypt, Roman governors struck provincial bronze
fractions of traditional silver staters for regional circulation. Cities and leagues, however, minted the bulk of bronze coins. Although civic coins often bore the imperial portrait, Hellenistic cities and Roman colonies included their ethnic names or legends to denote coins as their legal tender.\textsuperscript{50}

Augustus introduced standardized token bronze coins into the Roman east to facilitate the collection of a slew of customs duties and indirect taxes in Asia and Syria. Pergamum and Ephesus minted, under imperial authority, Asian provincial \textit{aes} from 27 to 15 B.C. The sesterius, dupondius, and semis were struck from brass, while \textit{aes} were minted from a bronze alloy with a lead content typical of the Greek world.\textsuperscript{51} All denominations were inscribed in Latin, often imperfect, and carried the bare head of Augustus, styled either as Caesar or Augustus, on the reverse. Reverses showed a laurel wreath enclosing either Augustus or C.A., the latter being the abbreviation of the \textit{communie Asiae} devoted to the imperial cult. These provincial \textit{aes}, which circulated widely in the eastern Mediterranean, provided convenient fractions both for the Asian cistophorous and Roman denarius.\textsuperscript{52}

Syria used Roman-style provincial \textit{aes} in two denominations that approximated the Roman dupondius. Minted from native bronze alloys, the coins seldom weighed more than their Roman counterparts. Although the mint at Antioch produced these coins, they bear neither city nor mintmark. The types

\textsuperscript{50} Harl, \textit{Coinage in the Roman Economy}, 107.
\textsuperscript{51} Walker Metrology, \textit{The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian}, 95.
\textsuperscript{52} Harl, \textit{Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D.}, 108.
were immobilized for the next two centuries; both denominations bear identical, monotonous designs with the imperial portrait and name on the obverse and on the reverse, a laurel wreath enclosing the abbreviation S.C., borrowed from imperial aes as a guarantee of the money's worth.

These provincial aes were intended for use in the collection of the many surcharges and customs duties imperial agents levied in Syrian caravan towns. The tariff regulations of Palmyra, laid down by Germanicus in 16-17 and reissued by Hadrian (117-38 C.E), required imperial customs agents to collect duties levied on the products of the Far Eastern trade in denarii and Italic aes. Syrian provincial aes were ready fractions for Antiochene and Tyrian tetradrachma. The coins, which were minted down to the reign of Severus Alexander, were popular due to their uniform weight and Roman appearance.

Roman denominations were widely used throughout the Empire. As far as silver was concerned, Roman denominations were predominant in both the west and the east; local denominations did also survive in Asia and Syria, though they were accommodated to the denarius system. Only in Egypt does it seem likely that, at any rate at first, the silver coinage was not closely linked to the denarius. In the east it is clear that Roman and local systems both existed side by side. In Asia and Syria they were closely integrated, and we believe that Roman denominations were in widespread use, though the evidence does not permit this belief to be given any more secure base. As in the west, there were several
different regional metrological systems. Only in Egypt does it seem likely that Roman bronze denominations played no role at all.

Roman denominations had been suddenly imposed on newly annexed territories, but the change to using them took place gradually. The most important period seems, if anything, to be the period of the late civil wars, as this seems to be the time at which there was the greatest tendency to introduce Roman denominations. This has been argued for the silver currency of Greece and Asia. In Syria the change may have taken place rather later. If the upheavals of the civil war were important, they were not final, as there is clear evidence for the change to Roman denominations under Augustus, Tiberius, and Nero.

Against this background, two main chronological changes are reasonably clear. The first was a general reduction in the standards of bronze coinage. The second was a change of denominations: smaller denominations tended to drop out and larger ones were added at the top. We can see this in the disappearance of smaller denominations during Nero’s reign. This shift can be paralleled in Rome by the gradual decline in the importance of the smaller denominations, though no larger denominations were, of course, introduced in Rome.
CHAPTER 4

-NUMISMATIC REFORMS: AUGUSTUS TO NERO-

Augustus achieved a stunning success when he refashioned the coinages of Rome and her provinces to serve a Mediterranean empire. He restored the purity of the denarius, expanded the production of the aurei, created new token bronze currency, reorganized mints, and resumed large-scale minting at Rome, and, in the process, spread the use of Roman coins and systems of reckoning. The denarius aureus, "golden denarius", stood at the apex of a descending chain of denominations in gold, silver, and bronze that were exchangeable at rates fixed by imperial decree. The keystone of this edifice was the denarius, the "link" coin against which all other coins, including provincial and civic ones, could be reckoned and exchanged. For the first and last time in their history the peoples of the Mediterranean enjoyed, in the denarius, a common measure of value.

53 Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700, 73.
Augustan coinage owed its success foremost to the economic growth stimulated by the Roman peace, but the coinage itself contributed to this growth by facilitating transactions, both large and small. Success also rested upon the utility of the Augustan denominations and the expansion of the money supply. Rising imperial expenditures and collection of taxes in coin led to the widespread distribution and use of Roman coins in the provinces. Utility, numbers, and availability inspired the most critical element of all, public faith in coins. Public faith ensured the triumph of the aureus, denarius, and eventually even imperial aes as the preferred currency in the provinces.\footnote{Kenneth, 74.}

Augustus, who premised his coinage upon the denominations of the Republic, offered the Romans currency whose design and engraving could not fail to inspire confidence. Republican coin iconography was subtly reshaped into an elegant miniature art that depicted the emperor and his family at the heart of Roman traditions. In 30 B.C. Augustus moved to assure the utility and supply of the aurei and denarii--no mean task, as Rome had coined erratically in the prior decade, and Mark Antony had minted innumerable alloyed denarii in his final years--by reinstating the bimetallic standard Julius Caesar had created in 47-46 B.C. The two principal denominations, officially called the golden denarius and the silver denarius, were customarily minted with identical designs and inscriptions, and at times, they were even struck from the same dies. Each denarius was provided with a half, the gold or silver equivalent, the quinarius.
Precious metal denominations were exchanged at the rate of 25 denarii to an aureus, a silver to gold ratio of 12 to 1. Imperial coins, given the convenience of this exchange and their impeccable purity, proved their superior strength and commanded premiums in the marketplace, because the purity of most bullion fell short of these coins.\footnote{Walker, The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian, 22,25.}

The purity of the denarius, which had fallen as low as 92 percent fine in the latter days of the republic, was restored to its original level of 98 percent. Down to the great debasement of C.E. 64 under Nero, silver obtained from Spanish mines or from melting old coin and plate was refined to a consistently high standard. Since denarii were so scrupulously maintained to the traditional Republican standard, denarii from the mid-second century B.C.E continued in use, constituting well over one half of the silver money in circulation down to the Neronian reform.\footnote{Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy: 186}

Augustus conducted a dress rehearsal for his reform in 25 B.C.E. at Pergamum, the capital of Asia, which minted two series of Roman style denominations bearing Latin legends. The portrait of Augustus occupies the obverse; a laurel wreath enclosing either the name Augustus or CA, the abbreviation of the Asian assembly (commune Asiae) that promoted the imperial cult, is found on the reverse. Coins minted from brass and bronze alloys used by the Anatolian cities earlier in the first century B.C.E., sesterii, along with dupondii, and semisses, were struck in brass, but aes, the most numerous denomination, were
made from bronze. The coins, although Roman denominations, were intended for use in Asia, where they were readily exchanged against imperial aurei and denarii or provincial cistophorii.

The triumph of the denarius would ultimately penetrate every part of the empire, minus Egypt, by the Flavian era. Mints in Asia Minor and Syria continued to coin Greek-style silver staters with fresh metal from imports and the Anatolian mines, but even here denarii circulated as equivalents of the didrachm, tetradrachm, and Tyrian shekel in taxation and trade. Hence, Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels designated the denarius as the coin rendered in tax unto Caesar.

Such a picture of gradual change prompts speculation as to the mechanism that brought these changes about. There is, of course, no doubt that the Romans could have insisted on a uniform coinage throughout the empire, had they so wished, and the fleet coinages of Antony and the CA coinages can perhaps be interpreted as attempts to do this.  

More indirect pressures for change would have arisen perhaps from three other causes. The first is the dramatic growth in the extent, both in terms of volume and geography, of the circulation of the denarius from the inception of the civil wars, a change which coincides well with the shift in denominations. The greater use of the denarius would naturally tend to promote the use of Roman denominations, not just silver. A second probable cause is the changes in the Roman system of taxation, especially under Augustus. The holding of censuses as

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the basis for the calculation of tax and the keeping of imperial monetary rations
would inevitably promote, if not require, the transition to Roman denominations, at
least in silver. It is presumably no accident that the two instances of direct Roman
intervention which we know from inscriptions (Thessaly and Palmyra) are both
concerned with the payment of taxes. A third possibility might have been the
foundation of Roman veteran colonies throughout the empire. Much of the direct
evidence for the Roman denominations comes from such colonies, which may
have used only Roman denominations.

These three causes need not, of course, have been the only ones, but they
allow us to construct a plausible explanation for a gradual change toward Roman
denominations becoming more and more dominant, and when any problems arose,
it consequently became inevitable that the decision should favor Roman
denominations. In this way, we can see that the change to Roman denominations
is compatible with the normal Roman habit of allowing local systems of
organization to continue under their rule; only as circumstances changed did the
unification of the monetary system of the empire take its place. 59

The Emperors and the Provincial Coinage

Compendiums exist about Rome’s attitude toward its provincial coins,
which is remarkable to consider. It would have been possible for Rome to abolish
its provincial coins, as it had done before. During the massive economic reforms

59 Ibid, 37.
of Augustus, this certainly would have been a viable option. Still, given the
existence of provincial coinage, we find three main areas where an overall Roman
policy might be expected or detectable: in its economic, its political, and its fiscal
aspects.

An area where one might potentially find an Empire-wide policy is in the
relationship between different silver mints and the sources of silver bullion they
used. On this point it seems likely that, while there may at times have been
coordination between mints (Pontus and Cesarean under Nero), the pattern of
minting was usually dictated by local considerations. Similarly, there may have
been a relationship between the sources of bullion and the central treasury in
Rome.

Reform of the coinage provides another instance where we might expect to
find some Empire-wide policy. Some reforms were, of course, minor and of only
local significance (Syria), and there was only one major reform of the coinage
during the Julio-Claudian period, under Nero. This has normally been examined
from the point of view from the mint of Rome, whereby the fineness of the
denarius was reduced in 64 C.E. from 98% to 93%.60 Walker has pointed out,
however, that Nero’s reform affected the provincial silver as well, and the picture
he gave can now be filled in greater detail.

In Crete the fineness of the silver coinage remained at 95%, but the weight
was reduced from that of a tetradrachm of 10 grams to 7.5 grams. This took place
after the early issues, but before the later ones. The Neronian Cretan silver was
probably made in about 55 C.E., and the latter between 63 and 68 C.E., as it uses
the later form of a portrait and hairstyle. At Caesarea, the weight standard of the
coinage was unaltered, but the fineness was reduced from about 90 to 80% in 64
C.E. 61

In Syria the reform was slightly more complex. The coinage of fine silver
Tyrian shekels was discontinued in 59/60 C.E., and replaced by the tetradrachms
of Antioch, which thereafter adopted the Tyrian reverse design of an eagle. The
Tyrian shekel continued at about 13.3 grams of silver, and the eagle tetradrachm at
11.5 grams. Moreover, it seems possible that earlier Syrian silver, whether Tyrian
shekels or Antiochene tetradrachms, may have been removed from circulation at
about the same time. In Egypt, the reform under Nero seems to have consisted
entirely of the removal of older Ptolemaic and Tiberian tetradrachms and their
replacement by the tetradrachms minted on the standard introduced by Claudius
and reduced slightly under Nero. 62

Because Syrian coinages generally bear precise dates, they offer a unique
opportunity to date the adoption of the imperial portrait on the coinages of the area.
Syria had added interest from this point of view, since it was an area well used to
ruler portraits. In addition to the portraits of the Seleucid kings on silver
tetradrachms, Antiochus IV had early in the second century imposed on his portrait
on the civic coinage of Syria.

61 Walker The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to
Domitian, 26.
61 David, 54.
62 David, 689.
It must be admitted that this reconstruction is only tentative, and that several problems remain. For instance, the metrological distinction between the earlier and the eagle tetradrachms is not fully clear; the eagle tetradrachms contained about as much silver as the Augustan ones, even though they do represent an improvement over its predecessor. Thus, equations of the coins with three or four denarii need to be made with caution. Moreover, the question of the date at which a close denominational relationship was established between the tetradrachm and the denarius is not all that clear, and it is a problem which is not helped by the virtual absence of any reason to suppose that the posthumous Philips were tariffed at so many denarii, any more than may have been the case with the late republican cistophorii of Asia.  

Debasement/Metrology

The metrology of the silver currency of Roman Syria and Palestine has never been properly understood, for, while it is clear from the sources that there were coins of the same denomination but of different values in terms of denarii which circulated side by side at the same time, this fact has not been grasped by modern scholars, who have endeavored to produce simplicity in a situation where none existed.  

I have spoken much on the various debasements initiated by Nero and his predecessors with the implication that these events were somehow common

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63 David, 610.
64 David, 633.
knowledge. Even many of the authors cited in this work are eerily silent when it comes to speaking about the hard evidence supporting the great debasements.

Aside from a handful of references from Josephus and the like, the question still plagued me throughout this entire project, until I discovered the seminal work of David Walker, who spent the better part of a decade examining the metrological properties of thousands of coins, not only from Asia Minor and Syria, but the entire Roman Empire. While in all the coinages which we have dealt with so far there was little change in the silver standard between the later Republican period and the 60s C.E., in Syria there seems to have been a constant switching from one standard to another, with the result that the drachma could contain anything from two to three grams of silver.

At the beginning of the imperial period there were two main silver currencies being produced in this area. The first was the so called ‘autonomous’ coinage of Tyre (shekel), which began in the second century B.C.E. and which continued to be produced throughout the Julio-Claudian period, until 57-58 C.E., which was almost certainly the last year of issue. Throughout this longer period it remained a coinage of quite remarkable stability, with no variations of either weight or fineness over the period of 120 years. It is easy to see why it became the currency laid down for use by the Jews for a common monetary term throughout the east. It had by far the highest silver content of all the locally produced currencies of the period, giving a drachma with a silver content of 3.3 grams.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ David, 67.
The other main currency of Republican Syria was produced at Antioch and consisted of tetradrachms struck in the name of the Seleucid king Philip Philadelphus, as mentioned earlier, but at first with monograms of the names of Roman governors and later with dates from the Caesarian era. In the middle of the last century B.C.E. this was still a currency of fairly pure silver. After a break of some years, production of this coinage was resumed by Octavian soon after Actium. This new issue continued throughout the 20s B.C. until 14 B.C.E. at least, perhaps later. Throughout this period these coins were struck on a new standard with a mean fineness of about 73% silver, giving a drachma with a mean silver content of 2.57 grams.\textsuperscript{66}

In the years 6/5 B.C. a major reform of the currency of Syria took place which affected not only the silver but also the bronze coinage. The reform of the silver coinage was in two stages, and took place in 5 B.C. Early in the year the issue of tetradrachms was resumed, with coins bearing the same reverse type as had appeared on the Philip Philadelphus coins, the seated Zeus, but with the head of Augustus on the obverse. It is clear that both were struck on the same standard. Later in 5 B.C., a new reverse type of the Tyche of Antioch was introduced, and this remained the standard reverse type until the end of the reign.

The introduction of the new type coincides exactly with the introduction of a new standard, markedly higher than that used for the Philip Philadelphus coins and the Augustus coins of earlier. The fineness of individual coins is variable, but

\textsuperscript{66} David, 68.
this is compensated for by the considerable number which had fineness over 80 percent silver, so that the spread of fineness of the two issues are quite distinct.\textsuperscript{67}

In 56-57 minting would resume after a brief hiatus at Antioch in the third regnal year of Nero (56-57 C.E.) with an issue of tetradrachms, didrachms and drachmas. These show another fall in the silver standard, with the silver content of the drachma varying between 2.28 grams down to two grams.\textsuperscript{68}

There was a break of two years after this issue before coinage was resumed in C.E. 59/60, with the reverse type of the eagle, which became almost the only reverse type used on the Syrian tetradrachms until the middle of the third century. As was the case when the Tyche reverse type was introduced by Augustus, the change of type coincided exactly with a change in standard. This new standard was much higher than that used for the previous issue and seems to be a reversion to the Augustan standard, which had not been used since. Like the Augustus coins, individual coins of this issue display a wide variety of fineness, so that the standard deviation of the Nero issue is as high as 5.35 percent silver.\textsuperscript{69} The mean fineness, however, at 79 percent silver, is very close to that of the Augustus coins, while the mean weight of silver in the drachma is only .01 percent different from the Augustan issue. Two drachmas with Nero on the obverse and Poppaea on the reverse, probably struck in about 62 C.E., give a mean silver content per drachma of 2.79 grams.

\textsuperscript{67} David, 69.
\textsuperscript{68} Walker Metrology, The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian, 77.
\textsuperscript{69} David, 69.
The mint in Antioch closed in C.E. 63. It then opened and closed again shortly before Nero's death, producing a small issue which is to be connected with the conduct of the Jewish War. The standard used at this mint was exactly the same as that employed at Antioch in the years C.E. 59-63. Again, there is a wide variation between different coins, with a consequent high standard deviation, but the mean percentage of silver is very close to that of the previous issue. The weight of silver in the drachma, at 2.79 grams, is .11 grams lower than that of the previous coins, but this is almost entirely due to the lighter mean weight of the coins, which in turn is probably the result of greater wear on the specimens weighed.

A further group of tetradrachms of Nero which must be assigned to Syrian mints is the very large issue of coins which have Latin legends and an obverse head of Nero and reverse head of Divus Claudius. These coins have often been assigned, albeit with hesitation, to the mint of Caesarea in Cappadocia, since the type is exactly the same as that used on the didrachms and drachmas of that mint.\

Furthermore, the tetradrachm is not otherwise a Caesarean denomination, and these coins are never found in hoards from Asia Minor. It is now possible to see that the different standard used to strike these tetradrachms is quite different from that used by Nero at Caesarea, and there seems little doubt that they should be assigned to Syrian mints, striking at a standard near to, though a little lower than, that used to strike Nero's Antioch coins of his third regnal year. From the portraits, all the coins can be given a date near C.E. 62-63, and they are to be

[70] David, 69
connected, as are most of Nero’s eastern coins, with the activities concerned with
the Parthian war. Two mints may have been used, one identifying itself by a star
behind the emperor’s bust and other by an ivy leaf. 71

Literary evidence is clear that there were two different standards in Syria
and Palestine. It is because the existence of two standards, the Antiochene and the
Tyrian, the one worth ⅔ of the other, has not been fully understood that the true
significance of the monetary phrase “good silver of the Tyrian stamp” has not been
grasped. This phrase is used throughout the East from the second half of the first
century C.E. until the end of the second century, when it abruptly ceases. There
has always been a considerable debate as to its meaning, since it is recognized that
the “autonomous” phrase is used.

However, the explanation cannot be as simple as this, for, as we have seen,
the Tyrian drachma is an Attic drachma worth one denarius, while the Antiochene
drachma is worth only ¾ of a denarius. The references to the “Tyrian stamp” must
surely be to coins which were worth a denarius and must be intended to distinguish
them from baser coins which would be worth only ¾ of a denarius.

The “autonomous” coinage ended in 57/58 C.E. In 59/60 C.E. there was a
major reform of the silver currency in Antioch, which took the form of the
adoption of the reverse type of a standing eagle which had previously been issued
at Tyre, but which had never been used at Antioch. Simultaneously, the silver
content of the tetradrachm increased considerably. That there was some

71 David, 70.
connection between the end of the coinage of Tyre and the issues of Nero at Antioch is of significance.

The eagle coins struck by Nero between C.E. 59 and 63 contain 6% more silver than three denarii, while if we take them to be coins worth four denarii, they are overvalued against the denarius by 26%. This is, for an eastern coinage, a comparatively high overvaluation, and it could be argued that it is too high for us to use as evidence for the coins indeed being valued at four denarii.\textsuperscript{72} However, a further piece of evidence tends to clinch the argument.

In C.E. 64 the silver content of the denarius fell to three grams. The tetradracmas struck in Syria after this date, however, were struck on the same standard as had been used for tetradracmas before the reform. This can only mean that the degree of overvaluation of the tetradracmas struck before the reform of C.E. 64 was sufficiently high for the balance not to be tipped in the wrong direction if the tetradrachm continued to contain the same weight of silver after 64 C.E. In fact, the degree of overvaluation of the eagle tetradrachm of Nero struck after the reform of the denarius is only 7.5% less than that of the Tyrian shekel.\textsuperscript{73}

The last eagle Tetradracmas of Nero are therefore indubitably coins worth four denarii; they are therefore struck on the Attic standard. If this is so, then clearly the eagle tetradracmas struck in C.E. 59 must also be of the same value. It was because the overvaluation of the tetradrachm struck in 59-63 was so high that it was not necessary to change its metal content after the denarius had its silver

\textsuperscript{72} Walker Metrology, The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian, 78.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 72.
content reduced in A.D. 64. The post-64 tetradrachm continued to be overhauled, though to a far lesser extent.

The significance of the closing of the mint of Tyre and the introduction of the “eagle” type at Antioch now becomes clear; and it is also clear why the eagle remains almost the sole type for the tetradrachm coinage of the east afterwards. It was the type--the eagle--which designated the standard--the Tyrian. In fact, the silver content of the new “Tyrian” Tetrachrm of Nero was considerably less than that of the old Tyrian shekel, although it was only until C.E. 64 that the degree of overvaluation against the denarius increased. The increase in overvaluation in C.E. 59 would not have mattered provided that the confidence was maintained and the competition of the superior coinage (being the former Tyrian shekel) was removed. The profit to the state from annexing the Tyrian coinage to itself and debasing it further would have been considerable.

Ironically, public faith in imperial coins made possible the policies of debasement that eventually eroded the Augustan currency. When, as frequently happened, imperial expenditures exceeded income and reserves, emperors debased the denarius to cover the budgetary shortfall, but the Augustan tariffing was preserved by adjusting the standards of the base metal fractions. For nearly a century (30 B.C. to C.E. 64), Julio-Claudian emperors maintained the standard set by Augustus, and Tiberius (14-37) even slightly improved the fineness of the denarius as he built his reserve of 675 million denarii.74 In 64, Nero, under the pressure of debts incurred in a desultory war in Armenia, rebuilding Rome after

74 Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700, 90.
the great fire (arguably started by Nero), and his own depraved extravagance, conducted the first major debasement since the Second Punic War.

Nero birthed a financial disaster, but the Augustan currency sustained the strain. Official tariffing among coins in all metals was preserved by lowering the standards for all denominations, an action having the added attraction of yielding more coins per pound of metal. The weight standard of the aureus was reduced to 45 to the pound, a decrease of about 11 percent from the 40 to the pound set by Augustus. In his eagerness to expand his money supply, Nero resorted to melting down and minting gold votive offerings at Rome, and he even sought out buried treasures such as a gold hoard rumored to have been unearthed in Africa.

Nero, cleverly applying lessons learned in manipulating the billion tetradrachmae of Egypt, debased the denarius by more than 20 percent. Its weight was reduced by one eighth, from 84 to 96 per pound, and its fineness was lowered from 98 to 94 percent. Thus, one million old denarii taken in taxes could be reminted into about 1.2 million debased denarii, but the overall profits were greater because Nero demanded taxes in fresh coins, and worn denarii were discounted or treated as bullion. Furthermore, many denarii were deliberately struck below standard so that actual debasement ranged from 25 percent or more.

Debasement netted Nero revenues, but it also courted risks. Price increases sparked by the debasement in 64 apparently had little long-term impact, but

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75 Walker Metrology, The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian, 47.
76 Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700, 91.
77 Walker Metrology, The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage, Part I: From Augustus to Domitian, 47.
imperiling confidence in the currency was the first step toward financial disaster. The international reputation of Roman coinage had been irreparably tarnished. Merchants ceased to export denarii to South India soon after 64, and Tacitus acidly notes how untutored Germans outwitted Romans by insisting upon Republican denarii instead of debased imperial ones.\footnote{ibid.}

Coins, however, were a minor part of overseas trade, for once they crossed the imperial frontiers, they passed in local marts by intrinsic worth rather than tariffing. It was public trust within rather than outside the empire that was critical to the success of imperial coinage, and this trust was shattered by Nero.

The entire Roman west employed a single monetary system, base metal currency exchangeable against the denarius manufactured by a single central mint at Rome. By the Flavian age, the imperial government had so successfully solved the problems of volume and distribution that it was using the bronze aes as full-bodied coins to the western half of the empire. The impact of this achievement was no less far-reaching, even if it resulted primarily from the state meeting its own fiscal needs, for it ensured the monetization of the empire's economy and the rapid Romanization of the currency in the east.

The civil war of 68-69 assured the triumph of the Neronian standard because none of the imperial contenders could afford the luxury of reform. In 68, Galba, in command of the mineral wealth of Spain, produced his first denarii just below the Augustan fineness of 96 percent. Once in Rome, he mass-produced the\footnote{See Tacitus Germanicus 5.5.}
denarii, but now on the baser Neronian standard of 93 percent fineness. In 69, Otho and Vitellius each adopted the Neronian standard, although Vitellian generals on their march to Italy struck finer denarii.

In 70, Vespasian reported to the Senate that to prevent the treasury from defaulting he needed 10 billion denarii in cash, a sum nearly fifteen times greater than the largest surplus ever reported in the treasury. Vespasian slashed the standard of the denarius (89 percent fine), and for the next dozen years Flavian emperors exploited provincial mines and devised new taxes. As revenues varied considerably from year to year, many denarii deviated from this new lower standard, falling to as low as 80 percent fine. In 82, Domitian ordered the second recoinage of the principate, returning the denarius to its Augustan purity, although he retained the Neronian weight standard of 96 to the pound. In a single stroke, Domitian restored the value of silver money and cancelled half of the effects of debasement since Nero’s tumultuous economic reforms in 64. His bold attempt at reform was a tribute to Flavian fiscal policy, because the treasury forfeited profits as the mint recoined baser older denarii into finer ones. By mid-85, however, war debts from the Chatti-War (83-85) and the expense of campaigns against Sueves and Dacians compelled a return to the Neronian standard (93 percent). Domitian laboriously conducted another recoinage, turning his fine denarii into baser ones.

81 Harl, Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700, 92.
For the first time, frontier warfare thwarted reform; it was an ominous preview of the fate of imperial currency during the third century.\textsuperscript{82}

Trajan would also follow the debasement precedent, but not nearly as drastically as Nero. Debasement for Trajan, however, cut short the minting of restored denarii, and repercussions were felt across the empire, especially in Syria, where mints lowered their standards for their coins. Whatever the forces behind Trajan's debasement, imperial revenues rose and prices leveled off in the next century. In 118 Hadrian forgave Roman citizens 225 million denarii in tax arrears (a legal term for that part of a debt which is overdue after missing one or more required payments), a sum that might imply annual revenues of 100 million denarii from indirect taxes alone.\textsuperscript{83}

It is a tribute to Augustus how little the imperial government debased its coinage in the two centuries following his reign. The weight of the denarius was lowered only once, from 84 to 96 to the pound in 64 C.E under Nero, and its purity was reduced only six times—-in 64, 69, 70, 85, 107, and 108—so that the pure denarius (98.5 percent fine) was transformed into an alloyed coin 84 to 85 percent fine. Domitian returned the denarius to its pristine purity in 82-85, although he was forced to retreat from this standard, but still the denarius averaged 90 percent fine down to 148.\textsuperscript{84}

Finally, erosion of gold and silver standards down to the reign of Marcus Aurelius had a limited impact on prices and exchange rates, because emperors

\textsuperscript{82}Kenneth, 92.
\textsuperscript{83}Harl, 	extit{Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700}, 94.
\textsuperscript{84}Ibid.
recoined just enough denarii to cover debts. Many heavier and purer denarii, safely tucked away in strongboxes or circulating in remote areas, eluded the melting pot. Periodic infusion of coins from mines and war often spared the need for a thorough recoinage. Between each change of the standard stretched long periods of stable prices and plentiful currency. Although heavy imperial spending and debasement generated sharp bouts of inflation, each crisis subsided quickly. Government and public adjusted, so that prices leveled off and the money supply suffered comparatively few adverse effects. The stability of Augustan currency ensured stable prices and wages that, in turn, contributed in no small measure to the legendary prosperity of the Roman peace.
CHAPTER FIVE

-THE ELUSIVE DENARIUS-

Readers of the Gospels are understandably surprised to learn that the Roman denarius was not the coin of the realm in Jesus’ Palestine. The evangelists repeatedly place the word “denarius” on Jesus’ lips in the dispute about paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:15, Luke 20:24; Matthew 22:19) and in various parables (Matthew 18:28; 20:2; 9:13; Luke 7:41; 10:35). Biblical scholars and numismatists are well aware of the potential pitfalls of taking such literary
evidence at face value, since writers and translators often use the monetary system that is familiar to their audience.

Over the last several decades, however, numismatists have become less confident that Roman denarii circulated in Palestine before the time of the first Jewish revolt (66-70 C.E.). Some of this shift is attributed to systematic analysis of coin finds, but the more decisive factor has been the construction of an overall picture of minting, use, and the flow of money in the early Roman Empire. As numismatists have tackled the confusing array of coins from the Mediterranean, it has become clear that in the east the Romans moved slowly, fitfully, and in ad hoc fashion to replace local coinage with Roman currency. Indeed, the Roman policy in this regard was to allow the continuation of local systems unless problems arose. When and where Roman coins were introduced in the east, they circulated alongside local currency.

By the beginning of the first century the denarius had become the exclusive basis of the monetary system in the Western Roman Empire, but its role further east was much more restricted or, in some places non-existent. Just as Pompey and his successors chose to govern through local elites rather than imposing direct Roman rule, Augustus and his successors were slow to replace the quality Greek coinage of the east with the Roman denarius. It was well into the second century

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86 Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700*, 53.
87 Burnett et al., *Roman Provincial Coinage Vol. 6*. 
before the denarius became the predominant coin encountered in Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine.\textsuperscript{88}

Before replacing the local eastern coinages with the denarius, the Romans sought to make the major local coinages compatible with the denarius. International trade, capital projects, a standing army, and the administration of tax collection throughout the empire necessitated a common monetary standard for important transactions. Only the Roman denarius could fill this role. But as long as local denominational systems were readily compatible with the Roman system—that is, exchange rates were fixed and expressible in integers—an account reckoned in denarii need not be paid in denarii. Someone from Asia Minor could pay in cistophorii, an Antiochene in tetradrachms, a Palestinian with Tyrian shekels. Only money remitted back to Rome need be converted into denarii. Until the Romans began to mint the denarius in the east in significant quantities—which didn’t happen in Palestine until the Flavian era—the denarius, much like the dollar today, was a measure of money familiar to many people who rarely, if ever, held one.\textsuperscript{89}

This general reconstruction of the Roman monetary system enables us to evaluate the literary and coin-find evidence with more confidence than was previously possible. In particular, the collective archaeological evidence from Palestine is almost certainly indicative of historical reality: The Roman denarius was a rare find in the Julio-Claudian era. The only hoard with a significant

\textsuperscript{88} Harl. Coinage in the Roman Economy: 300 B.C. to A.D. 700, 117-118.
number of Roman denarii in or around Palestine—the Usifye hoard of about 157 Augustan denarii and 4,200 Tyrian shekels found in a Druze village near Haifa in 1960—does not support the historicity of the denarius of the Gospel stories.90

The composition of the Usifye hoard (nearly pure silver) and its location (near the Mediterranean coast, closer to Tyre than to Jerusalem) make it more likely that the hoard was connected with international trade along the Via Maris. That such coins were prized by international merchants hardly implies that they were readily available to ordinary people for ordinary transactions. Nor does the rare find of a lone Roman denarius imply that the denarius circulated as common currency in Palestine.

The excavations of Gamala, a Jewish community in the Golan that was destroyed by the Romans in 67 C.E., corroborates this picture.91 Archaeologists uncovered 6,200 coins at Gamala, about two-thirds of which were Hasmonean issue. The silver coins consisted of forty three Tyrian shekels, seven Antiochene tetradrachms bearing the portrait of Nero, one tetradrachm of Nero from Caesarea, two silver coins of Tiberius from Commagene, and a silver shekel celebrating the Jewish revolt—but not a single Roman denarius.

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90 Vespasian was the first Roman ruler to mint the denarius in Syria in 69 C.E. See RPC 270-273.
There is, in short, no meaningful archaeological evidence for the active
circulation of Roman denarii in Palestine until the Flavian era. Moreover, none of
the instances of the word "denarius" in the NT provide evidence of the existence of
the use of denarii in Palestine. Rather, they reflect various NT authors writing for
an audience that used either the denarius or a variety of local coinages linked to the
denarius.

In contrast to the NT, the testimony of Josephus reflects historical reality.
Josephus mentions the Greek "drachm" twenty five times, the "denarius" never.
Because Josephus wrote for a Roman audience--an audience that used the
denarius, not the drachm--we can be confident his numismatic terminology reflects
the coins that were actually used in the situations he describes.

Assembling the evidence, literary and numismatic, in a critical fashion, one
can reasonably conclude that denarius coins were virtually unknown in Palestinian
communities until the Flavian era, although these communities had long been
acquainted with the denarius as a denomination to which their local coinage could
be related.

The significance of this point is not to be understated. Jews living in
Palestine and Asia Minor found themselves to be in an environment that afforded
them social luxuries that were not afforded to other groups in the empire. As
mentioned in Chapter One, these luxuries included exemption from military
service, equestrian status and most importantly, the right to practice their own
religion and rituals, which included their right to avoid coins that were
iconographic in nature--something that existed nowhere else in the empire. The
fact that the denarius wasn’t the dominant coin in Asia Minor and Syria afforded Jews and Christians the chance to maintain their second commandment obligations. So when production of the Tyrian shekel plummeted in favor of Nero’s new eagle tetradrachm, we can understand why Jews and Christians found themselves in a position where they simply could not buy or sell, which precipitated the economic crisis as predicted and described by John in his Apocalypse.
CONCLUSION

Revelation 13:15-17 describes a situation in which economic transactions were disrupted for Jews and Jewish Christians living in Palestine and Asia Minor, resulting in an economic crisis. This crisis found its roots in events prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., specifically to a series of numismatic reforms initiated by Nero. The author of Revelation, most likely a Jewish Christian, was describing the use of coins in Palestine and Asia Minor rather than prophesying future eschatological calamity.-Thesis

Evidence is clear that between 50 and 60 C.E the preferred coin of Jews and Jewish Christians living in Palestine and Asia Minor was replaced by an iconographic coin rendering them unable to buy or sell without coming into contact with the mark of the beast. Theologians have offered various theories as to the cause of this, including punishment for the great fire and standard assimilation practices for problematic provinces, but none have argued for the fiscal irresponsibility of Nero as cause.
In Chapter One I situated the Book of Revelation and its audience during a time of increased prosperity throughout the empire. It was a time of incredible economic expansion that netted great wealth for many citizens, which would test the loyalties of Jews and Jewish Christians in the east, particularly. As economic prosperity grew, so also did the influence of the imperial cult, where worship of Rome and its emperor were socially mandated—that is, except for one place. The special place for Jews within Roman society allowed for some social privileges not afforded elsewhere, particularly the right to worship their own god and exclusion from the imperial cult practices.

In Chapter Two I have shown the evolving attitudes of Jews towards iconography. We know the only group to have strongly objected to representations of the Roman emperor were Jews maintaining an extreme interpretation of the second commandment, and these objections did in fact extend to their purses in the first century. The Jewish Christians of whom John writes in Revelation 13:16:17 fit into this category.

In Chapter Three I introduced the reader to the complex world of first century numismatics in the eastern Roman Empire. I examined issues of distribution, scarcity, minting and more, all in the attempt to show that the hallmark of the Julio-Claudian era was the gradual accommodation of provincial coinages to the denarius and its standard of reckoning. Evidence is clear that Roman denominations had suddenly been imposed, but the change to using them took place gradually, at first. The most important period, it seems, was the period
of the late civil wars, as this seemed to be the time at which there was the greatest tendency to introduce Roman denominations.

In Chapter Four I explore Augustus’s stunning success in refashioning the coinages of Rome to serve a Mediterranean empire. Through his reorganizing mints, expanding production, restoring the value of the denarius, and exporting the Roman systems of reckoning, the people of the Mediterranean would enjoy for the first and last time a common measure of value. Equally important is the discussion regarding metrology and the debasements of various coinages. By examining the metrological content (thanks to the seminal work of Dr. Walker) of the denarius and others similar during the mid-first century, we can clearly see the correlation between the drop in silver content and the disappearance of the Tyrian shekel that Jews and Christians relied upon.

Chapter Five served to expound on the conspicuous absence of the denarius in the east. Because the denarius and its standard were so successful (even to withstand the strain of Nero’s radical debasements) it was not necessary to replace provincial coins. As long as they were compatible with the Roman standard—that is, exchange rates were fixed and expressible in integers—an account reckoned in denarii need not be paid in denarii. Someone from Asia Minor could pay in cistophorii, an Antiochene in tetradrachms, and a Palestinian with Tyrian shekels. It wasn’t until the Flavian era that the denarius penetrated the east deeply and, much like the dollar today, it was a measure of money familiar to people who rarely, if ever, held one.
The timing of the closing of the Tyrian mint was no coincidence and had it happened but a handful of years later, after the destruction of the temple, this argument simply could not have been reconstructed. Also, it appears that the iconographic sensitivities of the Jews were not a factor in Nero's decision (nor should it have been, considering his track record). Instead, what was viewed by one group as a solution to a fiscal problem was seen as nothing short of devastating to another.

One of the greatest discoveries in this project was the disconnect between numismatists and theologians. For many numismatists, the great debasement of 64 and the economic reforms from Augustus to Nero, as well as metrological matters mentioned throughout this work, are considered standard knowledge, yet many are mostly unaware of the theological ramifications of said events, specifically to the Book of Revelation. And in the other camp, the theologians of past and present have been equally unaware of the work done by numismatists that would shed considerable light on the social setting and function of the Book of Revelation and the New Testament, as well. And in this sense progress has been made in showing just how much each group has to offer the other.
This work in its entirety has amounted to little more than an extended commentary on one specific, well-known, and controversial verse. Much can be said that 70 plus pages can be written about a handful of words, and still so much more can be written. I have been upfront that I have been operating from a historical perspective in the treatment of John’s Apocalypse, and the entirety of this paper has dealt with raw information and its myriad of complexities to create a plausible reconstruction of my thesis argument. Even so, it is necessary to address some hermeneutical issues, since another goal of this work is to offer students of the Book of Revelation a hermeneutical alternative.

Readers new to the study of Revelation may be surprised to learn that many of its most notable symbols and passages have their provenance in concrete first
century events. So if this is the case, then what does this say about contemporary hermeneutic approaches to the Book of Revelation and the New Testament? What does it say that some of the most controversial symbols of the New Testament are not what they seem? What it is saying, and what I am saying in a roundabout way, is that there are in fact hermeneutical alternatives to the often irresponsible and painfully misinformed interpretations of John’s Apocalypse and beyond.

Yes it is more than likely that the number of the beast is a reference to Nero; the economic crisis was created by Neronian blunders and the mark of the beast simply could be a metaphor for those who were tainted by compromising with Rome. The list can go on. It is even more likely that John was writing his Apocalypse to his first century audience rather than prophesying future eschatological calamities.

One might also ask if the argued case is true: why would the Book of Revelation which was penned during the time of Domitian be addressing issues pertaining to Nero more than thirty years prior? This too may be a surprise to new students of the New Testament: the fact that authorship (let alone canonization) was a terribly messy and complex process that included revisions. Simply put, the author of Revelation would have infused many of the nuances and traditions of Nero into the texts (especially when dealing with coins) as other textual evidence in the Book of Revelation is clear about, that would have been beneficial to an evolving and growing church.

The students to this dialogue may find themselves confused for a variety of reasons. First, everything they have been taught about the subject via popular
writings, well-intentioned but uninformed pastors, and popular cinema has mostly been wrong. The second problem is to assume that because said events were rooted in concrete historical situations, they have no relevance for us today. Nothing could be further from the truth.

One particular verse, Revelation 13:16-17, is as much about describing the use of coins in Palestine and Asia Minor as it is about how to live under a tyrannical power as a resident alien. Though this work was penned more than two millennia ago, its message about how to live patiently and to endure suffering amidst oppression is always applicable, especially now.

We too live in a time of great economic prosperity amidst a culture obsessed with itself and the material. And as Christians, many have become bedfellows with this tyrannical power. The nation-state tells us it is on our side, that we can be as religious as we want (so long as it doesn't encroach on its own political appetites) and like the early Jews and Christians, we are forced to examine our own loyalties to God and to the state. Though in the United States Christians and Jews aren't martyred as in the past, we find that many of our religious commitments have been subtly hijacked by the voracious appetites of power and wealth. We too find ourselves in a position where we cannot buy or sell and we are forced to examine our everyday actions to see whether or not we are faithful to God, or to Caesar—and we pray for the wisdom to tell the difference.
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Index

Acts-15
Aegea-41,42
Aes-44,46,65
Aela-43
Actium-59
Africa-33
Agrippa I-25
Agrippa II-25
Alexandria-44
Alexandrians-14
Allison, Dale Jr.-70
Anatolia-40,41,51,52
Antioch-34,37,38,42,57,59
Antiochene Tetradrachma-46,55,71
Antiochus IV-28,55
Apamea-36
Apocalypse-8,9,17,23,42,77
Armenia-41,63
Asia Minor-10,12,17,22,23,24,27,34,35,37,74,73
Athens-39
Attic Drachma-61
Attic Standard-39
Augustus-12,20,23,32,40,42,44,45,46,47,49,51,59,74
Aurei-44,50,63,65,67,74
Babylon-16
Basket Bearing Coin-32
Beale G.K.-21
Bithynia-44
Book of Revelation-7,9,10,11,17,18,19,20,25,227,73,74
Bostra-46
Burnett, Andrews-25,29,34,35,36,52,68
Caesaria-34,37,41,60
Caesaria Maritima-37
Caesaria Mazaca-44
Caesaria Panas-37
Caesarian Drachmae-42
Caligula-37,43
Cappadocia-41,60
Cappadocian Drachmae-42
Carson, D.A.-18
Catholic Bible Quarterly-27
Claudius-15,38,39,41,55
Charax-43
Chattie War-66
Christians-12,16,18,19,20,21,22,27
Christ Jesus-19,20,52,68
Cilicia-36
Cista Mystica-40
Cistophorii-34,35,38,40,41,75
Claudius Divius-60
Cleopatra-41
Collins, Adela Yarboro-16,23,27
Commagene-71
Comumniae Augusta-35
Comumniae Asiae-46,51
Dacians-66
Davies, John-40
Davies, W.D.-70
David Walker, Dr.-12
Denarius-12,25,32,37,38,39,41,42,44,45,46,49,50,51
,61,62,64,65,66,67,69,71,75
De Silva, David A-17,19,21
Deuteronomy-25
Didrachms-34,40,52
Dio, Cassius-32
Domitian-11,15,16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24,66
Drachmas-34,39,41,57,59
Druze-70
Dupondius-46
Rome-
10,11,14,16,19,21,26,29,40,37,40,41,43,47
48,9,60,64
Roman Emperor-12
Saller, Ricahrd-15
Seleucia-36
Seleucid-28,55
Semis-46,51
Septimus Severus-44
Sesterius-46,51
Sicily-33
Silver of the Tyrian Stamp-32,42
Sueves-66
Synoptic Gospels-52
Syria-12,29,31,34,35,36,42,48,51,55
Syrian Tetradrachma-59
Tarsus-41,42
Taylor, Deborah Furlan-27,71
Tiberian Tetradrachma-55
Tiberius-43,47

Tetradrachma-39,42,51,42,54,55,60,61,62
Thessalonica-22,39,53
Thrace-40
Tiberius-43,71
Torah-27,28
Trajan-18,66
Tripolis-37
Tyre-42,56
Tyrian Tetradrachma-46,61
Thyrian Shekel-
11,12,27,28,29,31,52,55,62,64,70,71,75
Usifye Hoard-70
Via Maris-70
Vespasian-44,65,70
Vitellius-65
Yahweh-23
Yehud-28
Walker, David-
38,42,46,51,54,59,61,63,64,75