

# SHEKEL

---

## CULTURAL INSIGHT

Though coins were first minted in the seventh century BC by the Lydians (in what is now Turkey), the ancient Israelites minted no coins before 525 BC (the Persian period). Whenever the Old Testament speaks of sums of money before the Babylonian Exile, it is speaking in terms of weights. The shekel was one such weight that was used for weighing precious metals used in mercantile transactions. Ancient weights varied from locale to locale. While there is no single value for the weight of a shekel, an ancient shekel weighed around 11 grams, or about a third of a troy ounce. Because the weight of a shekel was not standardized across the ancient Near East, there are times when the Bible specifies which shekel is intended, as with Abraham's shekels "current with the merchant" (Genesis 23:16) and the "shekel of the sanctuary" specified as the redemption money for Israelite males (Exodus 30:13).

The four hundred shekels of silver that Abraham used to purchase the field of Machpelah from the Hittites in Genesis 23 would have been equivalent to around 4.4 kilograms, or a little over 12 troy pounds (in 2022 value, about \$3,350 US dollars). Note that Abraham weighed out the silver in Genesis 23:16. When Joseph's brothers sold Joseph to the Ishameelites, they did so for "twenty pieces of silver" (Genesis 37:28). The word "pieces," which implies coinage to modern readers, is not present in the underlying Hebrew (which is why the King James translators placed it in italics). Twenty shekels is meant here. Joseph was sold for 220 grams of silver, or around 7 troy ounces (about \$162.82 in current US dollars).

Because silver was weighed out, the law of Moses required that the ancient Israelites were just in their use of scales and measures (see Leviticus 19:35–36). Deuteronomy commanded the Israelites not to have more than one scale in their house, which could be used to defraud someone by using different weights for buying and for selling (Deuteronomy 25:15). Similarly, Proverbs states that "a false balance is abomination to

the LORD: but a just weight is his delight” (Proverbs 11:1). Job pleaded to be weighed “in an even balance,” using the idea of a correct measurement as a symbol of God’s justice.

### ***Related verses***

Genesis 23:10–16

Genesis 24:22–24

Genesis 37:28

Exodus 21:32

Exodus 30:13

Leviticus 5:15

Leviticus 19:35–36

Numbers 31:52

Joshua 7:21

Judges 17:4

1 Samuel 9:8

2 Samuel 14:26

Ezekiel 45:12

Amos 8:5

### **Credits**

***Author:*** Avram Shannon

***General Editor:*** Taylor Halverson

***Associate Editor:*** Morgan Tanner

***Senior Editor:*** Sarah Whitney Johnson

***Assistant Editor:*** Verlanne Johnson

***ScripturePlus Design:*** Jasmin Gimenez Rapple