Marvin Lloyd Miller, Ehud Ben Zvi, and Gary N. Knoppers, eds.

The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context


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The present volume grew out of a series of meetings of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, originally centered on “agrarian economies in depopulated areas in Persian antiquity,” but, as tends to happen to such volumes, changed its focus in the process. It also grew from a Canadian undertaking to one that better reflects international scholarship, including essays by Canadian, American, European, South African, and Israeli scholars. Notwithstanding, the final title of the collection, The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context, is a bit of a misnomer, since only one of the ten essays in the volume (not including the introduction) is not about the Persian/Achaemenid period—that by Yifat Thareani on the Negev in the Iron Age II. Even Gary N. Knoppers’s essay on Solomon and Huram is really about the way in which their relationship is represented in Chronicles, rather than on any real or literary relationship that may have existed in the tenth century BCE. But as a collection of essays on various aspects of the economy of Persian-period Yehud, this is an important addition to the rapidly growing body of literature about this pivotal period in the history of the land, the people, and the Bible.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first of these, “Introduction,” includes only one long essay, “Cultivating Curiosity: Methods and Models for Understanding Ancient Economies” (3–23), by Marvin Lloyd Miller, one of the three editors. Here Miller lays out the purpose of the volume: “to encourage a dialogue between experts in Ancient Israel,
Biblical studies, and cognate disciplines, such as anthropology, archaeology, history, and ancient economics and generate new approaches for the study of agrarian economies in depopulated areas.” Miller then goes on to define some of the key concepts used in the discussion of ancient economies, such as market exchange, marketplace, and market system. He discusses the development of different approaches to ancient economies, from the neoclassical formalism through the substantivist model to that of positivism, all of which he feels have “run their course.” He then goes on to examine additional factors that influenced economic activity in Persian-period Yehud, such as market exchange and its relationship with political and religious institutions such as the temple and the various levels of imperial government. Miller then attempts to trace the development of the economy of the nonurbanized province of Yehud, laying out the theoretical framework for the volume. The final four pages of the essay summarize the main points of the other ten papers included in the volume.

The remaining three parts are all titled “Economic Indications from…,” each being focused on one category of sources of information: Hebrew Bible, “Other Literary Sources,” and archaeology. However, as might be expected in a multidisciplinary area of research, the assignment of the different essays to one category or another often seems rather artificial. However, at least the first three essays in the Hebrew Bible part do use various biblical texts as their starting point.

The first of these essays is Ehud Ben Zvi’s “The ‘Successful, Wise, Worthy Wife’ of Proverbs 31:10–31 as a Source for Reconstructing Aspects of Thought and Economy in the Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Period” (27–49). As Ben Zvi states, his contribution to the study of this much-scrutinized chapter is “from the perspective of a historian of the world of the thought and memory of ancient Israel.” He sees the description of the ליח־תשא as utopian, not actually representing the activities of any real housewife in any historical period. In his view, the purpose of the chapter is to guide young men in their search of a bride and to teach young women what they should do to become wives who “both were a treasure and created a treasure” (28). This wife, unlike Lady Wisdom, was seen as being totally human, running a “real” household. Thus, the אנשה ייה can teach us how the author of the chapter envisioned the economic functioning of a single household. In such a household, the wise wife was responsible for production and sale of food and other goods, expanding her patronage network and that of her husband. Such activity was not limited to the traditional “female” sphere of the home. Finally, Ben Zvi shows how at least some of the women’s activities described in the chapter are mentioned in contemporary texts such as Xenophon and the Elephantine documents. All in all, this focus on the individual household is certainly an appropriate place for the beginning of this journey through the economy of Yehud.
The next contribution is by one of the volume editors: Gary N. Knoppers’s “More Than Friends? The Economic Relationship between Huram and Solomon Reconsidered” (51–76). This paper discusses the way in which the author of Chronicles, which Knoppers, following the consensus view, dates to the late Persian or early Hellenistic period (52), converted the “parity treaty” between Solomon and Hiram (whose name is consistently spelled “Huram” in Chronicles) as described in Kings into a patron-client relationship in which Solomon holds the upper hand. This is done by the Chronicler’s making various changes in the text of Kings, which Knoppers assumes was his source, such as replacing Solomon’s address to Hiram as “my brother” in 1 Kgs 9:13 to Huram’s calling Solomon “my master” in 2 Chr 2:13–14. The “covenant” between the two kings mentioned in 1 Kgs 5:26 is simply not mentioned in Chronicles. Knoppers devotes a long discussion to the Chronicler’s converting the twenty towns in Galilee that Solomon ceded to Hiram in 1 Kgs 9:11–13 to Solomon’s receiving twenty towns from Huram in 2 Chr 8:2. A similar section is devoted to the joint shipping ventures mentioned in both books, each with its own emphases. But before turning to these, Knoppers devotes a couple of pages (55–56) to describing the system of patronage relations that developed at all levels in the Persian Empire. He views the Chronicler’s Solomon as “a quasi-Persian-period satrap in the area ‘Beyond the River’” (55), whose relationship with “his vassal” Huram is typified by a lavish bilateral exchange of gifts. In line with the original “agrarian” theme of the volume, Knoppers does examine the types and quantities of agricultural products mentioned and concludes that, while they may seem large, they are not unimaginable. Finally, Knoppers explains how, in his view, the writer of the Persian-period “utopia” of Solomon “reflects aspirations on the part of Judean scribes for something better than the realities of their own economic and political conditions” (70). So, while not really dealing with agrarian or economic issues, this essay does contribute significantly to our understanding of the Chronicler’s Persian-period reality.

Louis Jonker offers another Chronicles-based paper, “Agrarian Economy through City-Elites’ Eyes: Reflections of Late Persian Period Yehud Economy in the Genealogies of Chronicles” (77–101). Looking at the Chronicler’s genealogies through an economic lens is an innovation, and Jonker admits that his biblical-studies perspective might be considered a limitation. Jonker then goes on to explain that his study is informed by the views of Roland Boer, who called for the integration of “Marxist economically informed ancient Near Eastern scholarship from the former Soviet Union” into modern biblical

1. Taking his cue, as have others, from Steven J. Schweitzer, Reading Utopia in Chronicles (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007).
studies. Specifically, Jonker cites Boer’s understanding of Persian-period Jerusalem as a “temple-city complex” and its economy as a “sacred economy.” He then goes on to a view of the genealogies in Chronicles as dealing with issues of the allocation or possession of land, especially that of “all Israel,” and emphasizes the long section that deals with the land “given” to the Levites as Israel’s sacral tribe. The genealogies, while composed by a member of the urban, temple-community elite, are more about the rural sectors of Judah and Benjamin than they are about Jerusalem, which is barely mentioned in these chapters. Their purpose, according to Jonker, is to show how these rural areas related economically to Jerusalem and to its temple, within the greater context of the Persian imperial administration.

The fourth “biblical” contribution, “Ancient Comparisons: Modern Models, and Ezra-Nehemiah: Triangulating the Sources for Insights on the Economy of Persian Period Yehud,” by Peter Altmann (103–20) is actually more about economic theories than about Ezra-Nehemiah. Much like Miller, Altmann first discusses the various models by which ancient economies have been studied, then “adopts” Douglas North’s “New Institutional Economics” as the most appropriate model. In his opinion, “NIE as a model brings formalist insights into a somewhat ‘substantivist’ or, perhaps better, ‘Weberian’ framework where all economic action is embedded” (108). He then briefly examines the well-documented economy of sixth–fifth-century Babylonia as a possible comparison but finds little to compare. Finally, Altmann turns to the events described in Neh 13:15–22 as a “case study” (111–16), as it seems to reflect economic activity: exchange of grain, wine and figs, collection and distribution of taxes at both the local and imperial level, and the sale of Tyrian fish—a luxury import item—within the context of Sabbath legislation. The examples are interesting, but at least to me it seems that the actual data are too limited for any far-reaching conclusions.

The first paper in part 3, “Economic Indications from Other Literary Sources,” is “ורפ וברו and the Seventh Year: Complementary Strategies for the Economic Recovery of Depopulated Yehud,” by Philippe Guillaume (123–49). This paper is based more on the Bible than on “other sources” but actually begins with a survey of the archaeological picture of Persian-period Yehud as being underpopulated and slowly recovering after the near devastation of the Babylonian conquest. In Guillaume’s opinion, the outcome of this

loss of 80–90 percent of the Late Iron Age population meant that there were not enough workers to cultivate the land, most of which lay fallow, with wild flora and fauna becoming a threat to human habitation. This, then, is the source of the Torah commandment to “fructify, multiply, and fill the sea and the land,” which first appears in Gen 1:22 (127). Since, as Guillaume explains in his preliminary remarks (123–24), he considers Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles to be products of the Hellenistic period, he is left with only the Torah as a biblical source that reflects the economy of Persian-period Yehud—written, in his opinion, as “secondary activities” by scribes whose main tasks were “the running of the administrative apparatus, keeping ledgers, recording taxes and the delivery of goods, and calculating interest rates” (216). In Guillaume’s reading, the Torah reflects an agrarian point of view in which the main factor that limits economic growth is the lack of workers. The commandment to “fructify and multiply” is basically a commandment to produce more workers, including boys and girls of a fairly young age, who would then expand the areas of cultivated land, bringing on economic growth. Guillaume compares this to Hesiod’s Works and Days, in which children are similarly seen as the key to economic growth. He emphasizes how different this view is from the Malthusian model that dominates modern economic thought. In the reality of Persian-period Yehud, the empire had good reasons to encourage population growth, since the production of more food was seen as critical to Persian military activities on the Egyptian front. Guillaume even goes so far as to suggest that the origin of the seventh-year ban on sowing and reaping in Lev 25:4 was a year-long conscription by the Persians meant to clear more arable land for the future production of food that would then support future Persian military operations. This land was then settled by a wave of new settlers, brought in by the Persians for this purpose (137–44).\(^5\) Guillaume’s reconstruction of the origins of both Yehud and of the Torah, while certainly original, come as no surprise to those familiar with his previous publications.\(^6\)

The contribution by Lisbeth S. Fried, “Exploitation of Depopulated Land in Achaemenid Judah” (151–64), provides a different view of similar issues, in fact relying on, and partially disagreeing with, Guillaume’s previous publications. The focus of the paper is Neh 5:1–5, in which the people of Yehud complain to Nehemiah about what is usually understood to be a debt crisis. Fried accepts Guillaume’s assertion that such a debt crisis did not occur but offers a different solution. Following such sources as Xenophon and the Murašu archives, from which we learn that the Persian kings granted hadru-

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5. Guillaume suggests that the “seventh year” mentioned in Ezra 7:7 refers to the sabbatical year. This was first suggested by Aaron Demsky, “Who Came First, Ezra or Nehemiah? The Synchronistic Approach,” HUCA 65 (1994): 1–19.
estates to various groups as a strategy to settle depopulated areas, she then concludes, “This would have taken place in Judah as well” (152). From here, she goes on to interpret the מָדָא הַמַּלְאךָ mentioned in Neh 5:4, not as “the king’s tax,” but as “the king’s rent” for this land, which had to be paid on top of the ilku service, pushing some of the people into dept. It was this debt that was abolished by Nehemiah.

The third essay in the third part of the book, Josef Wiesehöfer’s “The Achaemenid Policy of Reproduction” (165–73), is not only not Bible-related; it also has nothing to do with Judah and little to do with economics. Using various Greek and Persian sources, and consciously avoiding the pitfalls of orientalism, Wiesehöfer attempts to shed light on the workings of the Persian royal harem. An interesting essay in its own right, it really is difficult to understand why it was included in this volume.

Diana Edelman’s “The Economy and Administration of Rural Idumea at the End of the Persian Period” (175–204) joins a long list of recent publications offering various analyses of the so-called Idumean ostraca, many of which Edelman cites in her essay. These nearly two thousand ostraca, many of which were illegally excavated and sold to collectors, mostly record shipments of commodities such as grain and fruit in the southern reaches of Judah, an area that eventually came to be known as Idumea. In her essay Edelman sets out to deal with four economy-related issues. The first of these is that of the Persian policy regarding the use of imperial or local measures for commodities. In this section (177–85), she surveys the various dry and liquid measures known from various sources all over the empire, as well as those mentioned in the Bible and in Iron Age epigraphic sources from Judah, and compares them to those mentioned in the ostraca, calculating the rates of exchange between them. Her conclusion is that, while the empire seems not to have forced local authorities and markets to adopt imperial measures, there was a definite preference for measures that were easily converted. The second section of this paper deals with land ownership, tenancy, and taxes, as reflected in the ostraca (185–93). Here Edelman picks through the relatively few ostraca that seem to mention land owned by temples or estates and the few mentions of what seems to be rent or payment in service, comparing these with documentation, mainly from Bactria. Interestingly, like Fried, she also suggests that the middah of Neh 5:4 refers to rent but then concludes that, while this may be so in Bactria, in Yehud it was probably a tax that was paid in silver. Edelman then asks (193–95) if the various individuals mentioned in the ostraca as those through whom (‘al yad) deliveries were made were officially appointed agents or administrators, as


understood by Porten and Yardeni, and concludes that there is no evidence to support this. Finally, Edelman discusses Porten and Yardeni’s suggestion that Makkedah, the apparent source of many of the ostraca, was a local market town with its own storehouse (195–98) and, citing imperial policy as known from a large array of documents, concludes that it is more likely to have been an imperial depot.

The “archaeological” section of the volume includes two papers. The first, “Forces of Decline and Regeneration: A Socioeconomic Account of the Iron Age II Negev Desert,” by Yifat Thareani (207–35), is the only paper in this volume besides the introduction that does not deal with the Persian period. Here Thareani surveys the settlement history of the Negev region of southern Judah (meaning, for the most part, the Beer-sheba–Arad Valley) in the eighth–sixth centuries BCE. During most of this period, the Negev saw unprecedented prosperity, with ten large settlements, some forty smaller ones, and a series of forts and administrative centers as well. Thareani links this prosperity to the so-called pax Assyriaca, the relative calm that was brought about by the Assyrian domination of the entire area. Based on the archaeological and epigraphic finds, it would seem that the main source of livelihood was pastoralism, accompanied by small-scale farming and trade. The material culture was mostly Judahite, with quite a bit of “Edomite-oriented” (and, for the most part, locally made) artifacts as well, as well as some evidence of Arabian and other influence. Thareani discusses the Assyrian strategies for the control of the desert frontiers of the empire and compares these strategies to those employed by the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires in the same region. She then turns to the fairly sudden destruction of this array, in the opening decades of the sixth century, which has been attributed to either the Babylonians or to “invading Edomites.” Thareani prefers to see the destruction as brought about by local groups, semipastoralists who may have been identified as Edomites and who may have been seen as collaborating with the Babylonians, rather than on an invasion by the Edomite kingdom itself.

The final essay in this section and in the book as a whole brings us back to Persian-period Yehud: “The Rural Economy of Judah during the Persian Period and the Settlement History of the District System,” by Oded Lipschits (237–64). Lipschits emphasizes the rural character of the province throughout the period, this despite the gradual resettlement of Jerusalem, which, in his opinion, regained its status as the cultic center of the province but not as its administrative center—a position that he believes was held by Ramat Rael. At this site, Lipschits, over seven seasons of excavations, found nearly half of the some six hundred known Yehud stamp impressions, showing the site’s prominence

as an administrative center.\textsuperscript{10} After the destruction of Jerusalem and of the other urban centers by the Babylonians, the main areas of rural settlement that remained were the Benjamin area to the north, which included the new district capital of Mizpah, and the Rephaim Valley area to the south, in which Ramat Raḥel is located. The continued phenomenon of stamped jar handles and the continued status of Ramat Raḥel as an administrative center show that, despite the destruction of Jerusalem, much of the rural sector continued to exist as before.\textsuperscript{11} At this point Lipschits turns to the question of the “districts” of Persian Period Yehud. The basis for this is the list of the forty-one people and groups who are listed as building the walls of Jerusalem in Neh 3. Of these, seven are given the title “officer of the pelek of…” or “half-pelek of…” followed by the name of a place: Jerusalem (twice), Beth-Hakkerem, Mizpah, Beth-zur, and Keilah (also twice). Traditionally, the term pelek has been understood to mean “district,” and for decades scholars have debated the precise number, division, boundaries, and administrative purpose of this apparent division of the tiny and impoverished province of Yehud into such districts. Lipschits surveys the various opinions, then lays out his own views on the boundaries and composition of the various districts, in light of updated archaeological data and in line with his own views on the basic continuity of the administrative system in Judah from the late Iron Age, through the Persian Period and into the Hellenistic period. Here I must comment that a map would have been a welcome aid to following the descriptions.

While many readers of the various essays in this volume might find themselves disagreeing with this point or that, they are all well researched and well written. Seen as a whole, this attempt to examine the economy of Persian-period Yehud from a multidisciplinary and from a multinational perspective is a welcome addition to the ever-expanding literature on Persian-period Yehud.

\textsuperscript{10} For more details about both the site and the impressions see Oded Lipschits and David Vanderhooft, \textit{The Yehud Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah} (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, Benjamin Arubas and Manfred Oeming, \textit{What Are the Stones Whispering? Ramat Raḥel: 3000 Years of Forgotten History} (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

\textsuperscript{11} For an opposing view see Avraham Faust, \textit{Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation} (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).