# Estates and Village-Communes: On the Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel

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I would like to offer another approach to the economies of ancient Southwest Asia.[1] Within that context, the 'little kingdom' of Israel appeared late,[2] flashing briefly in the early part of the first millennium BCE before becoming an imperial province for most of its existence. Israel's marginality – economically and politically – is crucial for understanding its function within the wider economic dynamics of ancient Southwest Asia. In what follows, I offer a brief outline of economic patterns relevant to ancient Israel in the first millennium, which is followed by an example of how some biblical texts respond in metaphorical fashion to such a situation. The textual examples I

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[1] The framework for this essay is drawn from my recent book, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Boer 2015). The theoretical resources elaborated in this book draw upon the Marxist *Régulation* School and Soviet-era Russian studies. For *Régulation* theory, see the work by Boyer and Saillard (2002), as well as Jessop and Sum (2006). Soviet-era Russian scholarship is referenced throughout the current article.

[2] 'Little Kingdom' is the term used in ancient Southwest Asia. By 'Israel' I mean the small state or states (if one holds to the idea of two states) that appeared at some time in the first millennium after the long economic 'crisis'.

use come from Genesis and Exodus (the tension between Joseph and Jacob),

Job and Proverbs.

## Estates versus Village Communities

I propose that the constitutive economic contradiction in the southern

Levant of the first millennium was one between palatine estates and the

agricultural labour of village communities (Diakonoff 1982; 1999, 21–55).

Estates were initially a feature of temples (as in fourth-millennium Sumer

with its *en*, or supreme priest), which formed the focus of activities in more

powerful towns or 'little kingdoms', as they called such places themselves

(Diakonoff 1991b, 37; Liverani 1982, 250; 2005, 7). Soon enough, the estates

were subsumed under the power of the palace. The basic purpose of the

estates was the supply of 'goods for a minority' (Diakonoff 1999, 36), that is, to

supply those who were not gainfully employed – priests, monarchs, and their

perpetual dinner guests – with food, alcohol, and textiles. After all, they

needed to live in the way to which they had become accustomed. Estates

were therefore established in the vicinity of temples and then ruling centres,

administered either directly by functionaries or by tenure to landlords. Those

who laboured on them were indentured permanently or temporarily (corvée,

conquest, and debt-labour). Given the perpetual labour shortage, the estates

constantly sought to draw more labourers from the village communities, with little concern for the continued viability of the latter.

Why not simply tax the village communities instead of establishing estates? Two reasons are relevant. First, the power of the petty despots tended to be intermittent and uncertain. They might make grandiloquent claims concerning the vastness of their lands (1 Kings 4:21), but the reality was quite different, for without elaborate administrative apparatuses, clear borders, and the ability to police the territory claimed, the real power exercised was quite weak. For this reason, the ability to tax villages regularly was not within their power. The farther away a collection of villages was from the capital, the weaker was the power. If villages found the burdens of corvée labour or taxation too onerous, they would simply move out of harm's way— to a distant place or even into the mountains to join the ever-present Habiru. Second, villages were taxed at 10 percent, while estates supplied between one-half and two-thirds of the produce going to the temple or the palace. Estates were clearly the better economic option, for they enabled higher yields and could be policed reasonably consistently.

As for the village-communes themselves, the diverse and versatile mechanisms of animal husbandry (with 2:1 ratios of sheep and goats) and crop growing (Sasson 2010; Hald 2008, 44–121; Hole 1991) are of less interest on

this occasion than the social determination of economic life. That life was centred on what Soviet-era Russian scholars called the extended-family household commune or a village-commune (Diakonoff 1974; 1975; 1982, 35; 1991a, 88; 1991b, 34–35; Jankowska 1969; 1991, 253; Vasil'ev and Stuchevskii 1967, 28–32; Bartlett 1990), and what Western scholars have dubbed *musha'* farming (Wilkinson 2003, 2010; Guillaume 2012, 28–42). It designates a strikingly persistent approach to subsistence agriculture, largely because it has been tried and tested. Typically, farmers lived in a village cluster, with a population of 75 to 150 and coterminous with the clan, although smaller settlements often had less than seventy-five (Knight 2011, 122–123). From here, farmers would go out to the fields to work, as archaeological investigation of such settlements and their pathways indicates (Wilkinson 2010, 56–57; 1994; 2003; Casana 2007). But those fields were not held in perpetual possession by the farmers. Instead, non-contiguous strips of land were allocated to each household for cultivation. In the Bible, this is the *ḥelqat haśśādeh* of Genesis 33:19–20; Ruth 4:3; 2 Samuel 14:30–31; 2 Kings 9:21, 25; Jeremiah 12:10; Amos 4:7 (cf. the verb *ḥlq*, 'apportion', in Jer 37:12). These were social units of measurements rather than clear demarcations of land for the purpose of ownership. They would usually be of considerable length (up to one kilometre, or along the twisting path of a terrace in areas such as the Judean

highlands), but with a width of a few furrows. At set times, usually annually or biannually, those strips were reallocated on the basis of need, fertility, labour power, and so on. The means of such reallocation varied, whether by lot, by all the adult males, a council of elders, or perhaps a village headman. Needless to say, the process involved all manner of unwritten rules and much argument, but the outcome was that the strips were reallocated.

Collective activity was inescapable within the village and between villages that were two to four kilometres apart, for the individual was helpless in the face of natural and social disaster, needing cooperation and reciprocal aid to survive (Diakonoff 1976, 66; Hopkins 1985, 256). Thus, kinship, both highly flexible and embodied in the patriarchal household, was crucial. A further factor was the advantage of combined labour, whether with plough teams, sowing, or harvesting. Finally, the close-knit village-commune, with its headman and council of elders, was also advantageous for protection and defence against raiders. We may, following Roberts, describe these three factors as the communality of assent, of economizing, and of enforcement (Roberts 1996, 35–37).

## Between Joseph and Moses

With this proposed reconstruction in mind, let me turn to a couple of biblical texts that respond to this situation. That they do so in a number of unexpected and mediated ways will become clear as the analysis unfolds. The first exhibit of a textual mediation of socio-economic contradictions is the struggle between Joseph and Moses (Genesis 41 to Exodus 15). Joseph? Is not the fight to the death between Pharaoh and Moses? The text does indeed attempt to switch the protagonists, pointing out that the new pharaoh did not know Joseph and therefore began to oppress the Israelites (Exod 1:8). Rather than claim that the text deviously attempts to redirect the reader's gaze, I prefer to see this as one of the many mediations of the basic conflict in the text. In order to draw out that conflict, I focus on four features: the estate-subsistence opposition itself; the insertion of distance between the opposition, now in terms of Egypt and Canaan; the pattern of traversing that distance; and the depth of rupture required to break the stranglehold of the estates.

First, Joseph clearly establishes a hyper-estate system once he achieves recognition and then power in Egypt. Genesis 41 tells the fabulous story, in which Joseph is first called from prison to interpret the pharaoh's double-

dream. Indeed, the fat cows of the dream (Gen 41:1-8) already signal the tone

of the narrative. Over-fattened cows, to the point where they could hardly

walk, were a distinct marker of relative affluence and power, and one can well

imagine the idle rich dreaming about them. By contrast, the small number of

bovines in rural villages were normally used for traction; they consume vast

amounts of water and fodder, and were not normally used for consumption

(Brewer 2002, 434-38).[3] Having successfully interpreted the dream, Joseph is

promptly appointed as the overseer of not one estate among many, but of a

hyper-estate that is the land of Egypt itself (Gen 41:33-45 [Skinner 1910, 501-

2]). Apart from the sheer embellishment of such an image, it also assumes the

fiction of sweeping royal power that is found throughout ancient Southwest

Asia. Petty despots routinely liked to claim they had more power than they

could possible manage (see 1 Kgs 4:21). Now Joseph does what any estate

manager would do if given free rein: he gathers up all the grain, so much so

that the people have nothing left for themselves and have to come to him for

sustenance (Gen 41:46-49, 53-57). Forget the requisition of one third or

perhaps one half of the estate produce; Joseph wants it all. Yet produce is only

half of the story, for the key lies with labour and the best estate labour is

indentured labour. So later in the story (Gen 47:13-26), Joseph manipulates

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[3] The 'fatted calf' and 'fatted cattle' in biblical texts thereby become signals of power and excess (1 Sam 28:24; 1 Kgs 1:9, 19, 25; 15:17; Jer 46:21; Amos 5:22).

the situation so that people are forced to sell their bodies into slavery in order

to eat.

The text says less concerning the other side of the opposition (Gen

46:8-27), although I suggest that the clan of Jacob may be seen as the moment

of the village community. The clan of 'keepers of livestock' numbers 70

persons. Although this is an ideal number (marking fullness) that does not

equate with the genealogical list (Gen 46:8-27), I would suggest that it also

marks – if we include women and children –the normal range of a village-

commune. Clan and village-commune were usually coterminous, as

suggested by Judg 6:24; 8:32; 2 Sam 14:7; Jer 3:14 (Jankowska 1969, 239-53;

Schloen 2001, 155-65; Liverani 2005, 21-22). It may be objected that the

depiction is of a semi-nomadic group rather than a settled village community.

However, the opposition between the 'desert and the sown' is far from clear,

for village communities were highly mobile (seasonally or when under

pressure from a despot) and nomadic groups would periodically settle

(Schloen 2001, 155). In this light, both pastoral nomadism and sedentary

agriculture were variations, with many overlaps, on the resilient economic

form of subsistence survival.

The tale has already provided one instance of exacerbation (Joseph's

mega-estate), but another follows. Instead of the tension between estates and

subsistence agriculture taking place within close proximity, that tension is stretched out, as it were, with each end pushed as far apart as possible. Rather than being in the same agricultural space, they are now placed far apart, among other peoples and in other places. So Canaan stands for the village-commune, while Egypt is the locus of estates. That distance is emphasised by two features of the narrative: the physical amount of text that concerns this spatial separation (Genesis 41-50) and the constant travel between the two places. Such travel requires significant effort, whether the loading up of animals with provisions for the journey (the brothers seeking provisions), or the elaborate task of transporting a whole clan from one place to the other, or indeed the escape from the later bondage in Egypt. Narrative distance, then, emphasises the economic gulf between estates and village communities.

The issue of traversing distance leads to the third point, namely, the co-option of labour for the estates. At its most obvious level, the story concerns clan squabbles and a grand reconciliation, but through that narrative we find the metaphorical mediation of the securing of labour. This co-option begins with hostage-taking (Gen 42:18-25), and then includes the 'surety' of other family members (43:8-10), the fear that all the brothers will become slaves (43:18) and whatever trick it takes – the golden cup – to secure their labour (44:10-13, 18-34). Here it is worth noting that from the perspective

of the village community, when someone was indentured for estate labour, that person was 'no more' (Gen 42:6). They may as well be dead. Yet, this is only the beginning, for eventually Joseph manages to indenture his whole family into the estate system – a possibility already foreshadowed in Gen 44:16-17. Thus, the call goes out for the clan to settle in Egypt and it turns out that none other than God approves of such a move (Gen 45:4-14; 46:1-4).[4] What do they do when they arrive in Egypt? They become indentured labourers, keepers of the landlord's livestock (Gen 47:1-6). In the same way that Joseph secured the labour of all the Egyptians as his slaves, so also does he indenture the labour of his own clan. It is not the new pharaoh of the early chapters of Exodus who enslaves the Israelites, but Joseph himself. Indeed, the text hints that Joseph and the oppressive pharaoh become one, for the name of the territory where Jacob's clan is settled is Rameses (47:11), the same name connected with slave labour and storage facilities in Exod 1:11 (Brodie 2001, 397).

While the various metaphorical items of the story – golden cups, foreign places, hostages, and then enslavement – indicate the convoluted strategies used to co-opt labour for the estates, they also suggest the

[4] This assertion of divine will, as well as the theme that Joseph prospered under divine protection, is one among many signals of biblical ambivalence over palatine estates and subsistence agriculture. Many are seduced by the divine approval of Joseph (for instance, Kim 2010), but others note the negative tone (for instance, Stone 2012).

constituent resistance of village communities to such co-option. Despotic

power and its system of estates are not at the centre of the narrative; rather,

that power must constantly adapt to find new ways to commandeer the

labour so desperately needed for the estates. This brings me to the final point

of the narrative: the depth of the rupture required to break the hold of the

estate system. Exodus 1-15 may be read as a massive story of breaking with the

estates and their indentured labour.[5] It is worth noting that the story

attempts to shift the blame not only onto a cruel pharaoh (as I indicated

earlier), but also onto the increasingly oppressive conditions of labour (Exod

1:8-22; 2:23-25; 5:10-21). As if the indentured labour secured by Joseph is any

different! Of course, it is easier to blame a foreigner for oppression. But the

key is the amount of effort required to break away from the estate system. In

this legendary tale, that effort takes the form not so much of sporadic

violence (Exod 2:11-15) as of the drawn-out account of the divinely ordained

plagues (Exod 5:1-12:36). It becomes even tougher since God hardens

pharaoh's heart time and again. Then we have the violence, not only of the

first born of the Egyptians, but also of the drowning of pharaoh's chariots in

the sea (Exod 13:17-15:21). This violence marks not merely the rupture, but also

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[5] For a useful recent overview of Exodus studies, see Dozeman's *Methods for Exodus* (Dozeman 2010).

the sheer eagerness with which people would seek the destruction of despots and their centres and symbols of power.

These 25 chapters that cover the transition between Genesis and Exodus may then be seen as tale in which the struggle between estates and village communities leaves it traces on one of the most significant accounts in the Hebrew Bible. As one would expect with such a tale, these traces have been mediated and metaphorised in terms of clan struggles, exotic places, foreign depots and miraculous escapes. But let me close this section with another signal of the depth of the tension I have been tracing. When Jacob hears that Joseph is alive and powerful in Egypt, the text reads, 'He was stunned; he could not believe them' (45:26). I suggest that Jacob expresses surprise not that Joseph is alive, but that the bastard is running a mega-estate.

## Formal and Ethical Codes: Job and Proverbs

The story of the violent break from the exoticised estate system in Egypt gains, as may be expected, other levels of complexity with the wilderness wanderings. Here Moses the liberator becomes also a tyrant against whom the people constantly murmur and rebel, so much so that the people clamour precisely for the Egyptians leeks, lentils and fleshpots (see further Boer 2014; Langston 2006, 4-8). But my interest is specifically in the

way the socio-economic tensions of the estates and subsistence agriculture are mediated through the texts. In this section, I consider a number of other texts where these tensions leave their traces.

To begin with, I suggest that the much debated contradictions within and between the prologue-epilogue and poetry of Job may be seen also from the angle I have been pursuing. Obviously, the prologue depicts what may be called an uber-landlord, with his thousands of sheep, camels (!), oxen and donkeys. More importantly, he has a multitude of slaves, indentured labourers to manage the flocks and deal with the crops. Even the life of leisure and partying of his sons and daughters betrays the ostentatious wastage of the unemployed ruling class (Job 1:4). However, more intriguing is the mark in the narrative of an all-too familiar pattern: the periodic destruction of the power of the ruling class (Job 2:13-19). The explanations are pure legend – Sabaean and Chaldean raiders, fire from heaven and a wind from the desert – but the destruction of landlord estates and power at the hands of peasants, estate labourers and bands of Habiru were common enough. Given the opportunity, they would eagerly hasten the demise of yet another hated landlord or indeed despot (Kozyreva 1991, 99; Yee 2007, 13-15). Indeed, the mythical accounts of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19) embody such a perspective in their own way,

as do the warnings of 1 Samuel 8, the parable of the bramble in Judg 9:8-15, the long account of the failings of the kings of Israel and Judah and the eventual punishment in 1-2 Kings, and the account of the resistance by the 'people of the land' and myriad other groups in Ezra-Nehemiah to the imposition of an imperial regime of plunder with the return of the exiles. As far as Job is concerned, the epilogue then also marks the effort to re-establish the estates once again, in the ever-repeated cycle that is part of the struggle between subsistence survival and the palatine estate system (Job 42:10-17).

The questions remains as to how we may read the relations between the prologue-epilogue and the much larger poetic text of Job. At one level, the trenchant criticisms, the laments, the demolition of the arguments of his 'friends', and above all the challenge to Yahweh who allows such suffering (and who is actually forced by Job to answer) may be read as a devastating undermining of all that justifies an estate system, as indeed of the later (first millennium BCE) tribute-exchange system that came to displace the estate system elsewhere in ancient Southwest Asia. If we see the excesses described in prologue and epilogue as implicit criticisms of the life Job leads, then those criticisms may enhance what is found in the poetic texts. However, another level also appears in this long poetic section of Job: it may also be seen as the lament of a landlord who feelsthat the life to which he has become

accustomed has been unjustly stripped away from him. That world is one in which everyone made way for him with deference and the poor were grateful for his assistance (Job 29). In this light, he is, of course, 'blameless' – the persistent theme of the book (Fokkelman 2012, 199, 242-43). Job 42 offers a good example of this perspective, with its alienated clan members, the abhorrence of his wife, the despising by children, and his bones clinging to his skin and flesh. Above all, I am struck by Job 42:15-16:

> My female slaves count me as a stranger;
>
> I have become an alien in their eyes.
>
> I call to my slave, but he gives me no answer;
>
> I must myself plead with him.

Truly, suffering must be real if even the indentured labourers treat one with disrespect and ignore what one commands! No wonder he feels as though the 'hand of God' has touched him (Job 42:21; see also Job 30).[6]

While Job reveals tensions at the level of textual structure, Proverbs does so on a different register again. Here it is clearly ideological, manifesting itself in what may be called ethical oppositions. Proverbs is built on a series of

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[6] Surprisingly, of the multitude of studies on Job, very few focus on economic and class features (Newsome 2003, 48, 66-67; Pelham 2012, 170-83). Of those that do, only Dawson's does so to any extent (2013).

contrasts, between wise and foolish, prudent and simple, humble and proud, righteous and wicked, industrious and lazy, sound and rotten, truth and lies, and, of course, between rich and poor.[7] None of these terms is ideologically innocent; indeed, none are innocent of class consciousness. While we may initially feel that the criticisms of the proud, the wicked, and the lying are directed at the idle rich, it soon becomes apparent the positive virtues attach to the ruling class. They are the ones who are wise, righteous, industrious and therefore rich. All of these are signs that they have been blessed by God. It requires little imagination to see here the ethics and class consciousness of landlords and of the perpetual dinner guests at the monarch's table. Of course, the despised are precisely those who work the estates or the village communities. They are wicked, simple, lazy, rotten and therefore poor. At the same time, Proverbs reveals the subtlety of this ruling class consciousness, especially with the occasional mild warnings against riches (Prov 11:4, 28; 15:16-17; 16:8; 17:1, 5; 18:23). Are these perhaps relics of village wisdom? If so, they have been co-opted into the subtle assertion that one should always attain to the higher calling of humility, wisdom and righteousness. These are signposts on the way to real and moral wealth; earthly gain is therefore a secondary concern, which should not distract one from the higher virtues. Of

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[7]Ste. Croix shows a comparable situation in Greek ethics, which borrowed heavily from ancient Southwest Asia (Ste. Croix 2006, 338-39, 1972, 371-76).

course, the studied disdain of filthy lucre is possible only for those who have more than enough so they need not worry themselves about the needs of daily life. This is a far cry from the subsistence survival of the village communes.

## Conclusion

By now it should be obvious that the ways texts respond, politically and ideologically, to socio-economic tensions are as varied as the texts themselves. Those attempts may involve narrative structures (Genesis 41-Exodus 15), textual form (Job) and ideological oppositions (Proverbs). Mediated and unexpected are these responses, but they boil down to the fact that texts often attempt ideological and narrative resolutions to socio-economic contradictions. And the determinative contradiction is one between palatine estates and the subsistence survival economy of village-communes, a contradiction that was both constitutive and limiting.

However, I close on a slightly different note, which is actually a case of Freud's observation that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. In 1 Samuel 8:11-18 we find a pure vignette of what may be expression of the village communities' attitude to the palatine estate system. The king, warns Samuel, will take your sons to 'plough his ground and reap his harvest', he will force your daughters

to be 'perfumers and cooks and bakers'. Even this pattern of drawing away

more and more clan members to labour on estates is not enough, for the

despot will also seize the 'best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards

and give them to his functionaries'. He will also tax the grain and animals of

the village communities at ten per cent. The result: 'you shall be his slaves'. So

it was with the palatine estate system.

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