Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
AE	*aes*, bronze/copper/brass
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AR	*argentum*, silver
AYB	Anchor Yale Bible
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BI	*Biblical Illustrator*
BInt	Biblical Interpretation series
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alltestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
CRINT	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
DEJ	*The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*. Edited by John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955–)
enl.	enlarged

EvT	*Evangelische Theologie*
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
Hen	*Henoch: Studies in Judaism and Christianity from Second Temple to Late Antiquity*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBS	Jerusalem Biblical Studies
JHS	*Journal of Hellenic Studies*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period: Supplement Series
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
KTU	*Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*, edited by M. Dietrich et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976; 2nd enlarged ed. [= CTU], Münster, 1995)
LAI	Library of Ancient Israel
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LHB/OTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Series
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
LXX	Septuagint (Greek)
MT	Masoretic Text (Hebrew)
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OIP	Oriental Institute Publications
OTG	Old Testament Guides

OTL	Old Testament Library
PEQ	*Palestine Exploration Quarterly*
QR	*Quarterly Review*
repr.	reprinted
SAHL	Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSP	*Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SOFS	Symbolae Osloensis: Fascicle Supplement
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
TAD	Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. 4 vols. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Department of the History of the Jewish People, 1986 (*TAD* A), 1989 (*TAD* B), 1993 (*TAD* C), 1999 (*TAD* D).
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2004.
Transeu	*Transeuphratène*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Ancient Sources Quoted

Except as otherwise indicated, translations of ancient sources are from the following works:

Bible: New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), with its verse numbers. Alternate parenthesized or bracketed numbers show versification of the Masoretic Text (MT).

Josephus and other Greek sources: Loeb Classical Library editions (LCL) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

The Mishnah: Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translation from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

Qumran-related texts: Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997–98).

Introduction

> And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax."
>
> *Nehemiah 5:4*

This short verse from Nehemiah addresses a seemingly mundane set of circumstances: taxation, borrowing, and the challenges of farming. The complaint that a particular group lodges to Nehemiah, the governor in Judah working under the Persians (fifth century BCE), does not offer lofty theological concepts or purple prose. Yet the issues at stake in this verse were pivotal for those trying to preserve their households under trying conditions. How would these persons retain their land? Were the lending arrangements fair, or did exorbitant interest rates place them at great risk? What was the nature of their tax obligations? Would God protect the righteous believer or allow such a person to reach desperate straits? Such questions are actually far from mundane: they point to critical realities for those living in Judah during the Second Temple period.

Those who study the Bible are becoming increasingly attentive to the significance of economics when examining ancient texts and the cultures that produced them. Although exegetical studies often touch on economic matters, it is also necessary to focus specifically on the economics of the historical context that ancient sources address or from which they arise. From the restoration of the temple in the sixth century BCE to the context out of which the Jesus movement arose, it is difficult to overstate the importance of economics for understanding the cultural dynamics of ancient Judah. In a stratified economy, with difficult farming conditions and a succession of foreign rulers, wealth and poverty concerns pervaded every aspect of life.

This book examines the socioeconomic landscape of Judah/Judea in the Second Temple period, from the end of the Babylonian exile to the destruction of the temple by the Romans (532 BCE to 70 CE). No previous study has focused specifically on economics when analyzing this time frame, and the current discussion will engage in a close reading of key sources, consideration of relevant archaeological evidence, and theoretical analysis. By taking up topics like marriage gifts, borrowing and lending, and taxation, our discussion will provide an overview of economic life, with fresh insights from relevant biblical texts, including passages and entire books that do not receive enough attention in this regard (e.g., Ruth, Ezra–Nehemiah).

Discussion will proceed according to theme, with special attention to family life and the status of women and children, along with marketplace practices and taxation. Our thematic focus will allow for innovative analysis and conclusions. For example, interpreters often take the sayings on wealth and poverty in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ben Sira as a timeless set of abstract principles, rather than as a response to actual dynamics on the ground. Yet when the author of Ecclesiastes rails against bribery (Eccl. 7:7) or Ben Sira urges his listeners to stand as guarantors for their neighbor's loan (Sir. 29:14), these sapiential figures are responding to financial realities and the expectations of their sacred tradition. The thematic arrangement also allows us to consider the implications of living under a succession of foreign powers. Burdensome taxation policies and stratification confronted most Judeans during this period; in every chapter this study details the financial impact of colonization.

Our study will begin at the household level and work outward to the larger marketplace and state level. Chapter 1, "Family Life and Marriage," will survey basic issues like household structure, family size, and population levels during the Second Temple period. We will highlight the importance of the patriarchal kinship grouping, or "house of the father," that persisted into this period. The bulk of this chapter will take up the topic of marriage and its economic implications. Our discussion will point to the endogamous understanding of marriage (i.e., marrying within one's kinship group) in many of the extant sources and conflicts that developed over proper matches. Economic issues are often at the center of decisions in this regard (e.g., Ezra 9–10). This chapter will also address the custom of marriage gifts as a component of the betrothal process and how divorce might have worked during this period. Information about marriage customs appears in the biblical texts and also in such extracanonical sources as the Elephantine papyri and the Babatha archive.

Chapter 2, "The Status of Women and Children," will consider the roles for women and their offspring in the household structure and how they contributed to the viability of their kinship group and the larger economy. Focus on this topic has increased dramatically in recent decades, and our discussion will address both the primary sources and insights from cross-cultural analysis. We will highlight the duties of women in food preparation and their responsibilities in sustaining family members, along with a host of other issues. This chapter will also address the situation of widows in the social structure, including the critical question of whether they could inherit property. In this regard a pertinent issue is how much levirate marriage (i.e., marrying the brother of one's deceased husband) continued as a custom during the Second Temple period. The second half of the chapter will consider the status of children. Sons usually adopted the work of their father, in most cases assisting with farming duties as they matured. Those from more elite, literate households had greater opportunities, including the possibility of a scribal career or a priestly office if they came from the right family. With regard to daughters, this topic has received little attention in studies of the period. This chapter will argue that most daughters had to maintain a more public existence than sources such as Ben Sira and Philo allow, since the majority of households could not afford to keep their female children in seclusion. The discussion of women and children will also consider the task of "honoring" one's parents and the economic implications of this requirement. Finally we will examine inheritance questions, including the possibilities for daughters in this regard, and the experience of debt slavery for children.

Chapter 3, "Work and Financial Exchanges," will move beyond the household level to the larger marketplace. First, we will survey the most common activities, with specific attention to the responsibilities of agriculturalists in Judah. Most households engaged in farming pursuits under trying conditions, creating a somewhat predictable but challenging rhythm to their year. Other activities included animal husbandry, pottery making, and more elitist pursuits like that of the scribe, priest, or large landowner. The rest of this chapter will examine public transactions. During the Second Temple period, the use of coinage became more commonplace, even though bartering remained the predominant form of exchange. Interest charges, including the practice of vouching for the loan of another (surety), receive attention in the sources from this period, as does the practice of bribery. Here the discussion will highlight wariness about loans and becoming a guarantor, especially in the Wisdom literature. A culture of reciprocity characterized many exchanges, with persons seeking either social advancement or the maintenance of their kinship group and reputation. In our discussion of financial exchanges, we will consider the influence of the regulations in the Pentateuch on such matters as interest and bribery.

Chapter 4, "Taxation and the Role of the State," will adopt a more diachronic approach. First, the topic of taxation will be examined in light of social anthropology. Many theoretical studies have found continuities across different cultural contexts in terms of taxation, especially when methods of farming are similar. After establishing some common trends in settings like that of postexilic Judah, we will proceed with a historical analysis from the Persian period to the Roman period. Of particular importance will be the difficulty most persons faced in meeting revenue obligations to imperial rulers, local governors and officials, and the priestly establishment. Exacting requirements continued throughout the Second Temple period and not just during the reign of major figures like Darius I (550–486 BCE; reigned 522–486) or Herod the Great (73–4 BCE; reigned 37–4). This chapter will consider key passages in the biblical texts and extracanonical writings that address taxation, including the critical writings of Josephus (37–95 CE).

Finally, Chapter 5, "The Ethics of Wealth and Poverty," will study the ethics of material holdings in certain Second Temple texts, most notably the Wisdom and apocalyptic literature. Is it acceptable to become a wealthy individual in these sources? Can divine judgment reverse the effects of poverty? The sapiential texts from this period offer a variety of propositions on financial holdings, not all of them consistent. In some passages, wealth functions as a reward for virtue and blessing from God, while other sayings highlight wisdom as preferred over material possessions and the corrupting influence of money. Most sapiential books, including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Ben Sira, do not have an eschatological framework for adjudicating the consequences of human behavior in relation to economics. According to these texts, a righteous individual who has struggled with poverty cannot hope for heavenly reward to reverse the unfairness of earthly existence. Here our discussion will point to a profound shift on this point in some of the later sapiential and apocalyptic texts of the Second Temple period. In certain passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Enochic books, and the New Testament (esp. the Gospel of Luke), the promise of a blessed afterlife allowed for an otherworldly judgment scene that could reverse the plight of the righteous poor and the unfair advantages of any rich persons who had cheated. Apocalyptic ideas created a new horizon for examining wealth and poverty and how God might evaluate human conduct in this area.

Before proceeding with this discussion, a few terminological and historical matters require clarification. First is the issue of proper terminology for the people who are the focus of this study: those who lived in Judah during the Second Temple period or considered themselves part of this entity. Such terms as "Israelite," "Judean," and especially "Jewish" often appear interchangeably in discussions of this type, and this can lead to confusion. In particular, the use of "Jewish" to refer to the inhabitants of Judah during this period is a complex matter. As Shaye J. D. Cohen and other commentators have pointed out, "Judean" is a more accurate designation.[1] The English usage of "Jewish" often indicates a practitioner of "Judaism," a contemporary religious tradition.[2] Of course the roots of this tradition stretch back well before the Babylonian exile (586–532 BCE). In sources from the Second Temple period, however, terminology in this regard usually has more of an ethnic or geographic connotation. Greek *Ioudaios* derives from Hebrew *yĕhûdî* (pl. *yĕhûdîm*), which describes an inhabitant of Judah/Judea or someone who is to be identified with that group (i.e., a "Judean"). Cohen explains that only after the Maccabean revolt (167–160 BCE) does Greek *Ioudaïsmos* (usually translated as "Jewish") appear in 2 Maccabees (first century BCE) and have a more cultural and religious connotation.[3] The extant evidence suggests that outside rulers from this period, such as the Persians and Seleucids, understood the usage of *yĕhûdî* or *Ioudaios* to indicate a specific people, alongside other ethnic-geographic entities (e.g., Egyptian). Consequently, in this volume the discussion will generally employ the term "Judean" rather than "Jewish" when referring to the inhabitants of the region under consideration, especially when discussing events before the Maccabean revolt.[4] Another defensible way of proceeding in this regard is to refer to the postbiblical literature, especially texts and ideas that arose after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE), as characteristic of "Early Judaism," a tactic that we also will take at several points in the discussion.[5]

Similar caution is in order when referring to the "religious" identity of Judeans and how their "religion" changed during this formative period.

1. S. J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69–70.

2. The use of "Jewish" can also indicate an ethnic and/or cultural group, including nonobservant Jews.

3. See 2 Macc. 2:21; 8:1; 14:38. Even this point is disputed. Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSJ* 38 (2007): 457–512, argues that *Ioudaïsmos* in 2 Maccabees is still more of an ethnic designation.

4. This designation becomes more complex when discussing those in Diaspora, but Cohen and other scholars retain "Judean" as an ethnic label rather than a religious one even when referring to persons in other areas (e.g., Elephantine). See Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 75–76.

5. John J. Collins, "Early Judaism in Modern Scholarship," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (hereafter *DEJ*), ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1–2, distinguishes between the preexilic practices of ancient Israel and the "Early Judaism" that emerged after the exile, especially after the reign of Alexander the Great. The Early Judaism designation functions as a welcome corrective to an earlier scholarly tendency to refer to this period as "Late Judaism" (*Spätjudentum*), implying a decline from the more pristine traditions of the Prophets.

Studies of this type often proceed as if "religious" dynamics can be distilled from political, social, and economic factors. The distinction between "secular" and "religious" that often occurs in contemporary discourse does not generally work when describing events in antiquity. As Brent Nongbri explains in an important new book, those living in the ancient world did not understand their "religion" as a separate sphere of human existence. The idea of ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, or Judean "religion" largely developed after the European Enlightenment. These ancient civilizations had intricate, fascinating portraits of the divine, but we risk projecting our own modern taxonomies onto the ancient world by seeking to separate the religious from the ethnic, cultural, or economic. Nongbri urges the need for restraint on this point: "Religion is a modern category; it may be able to shed light on some aspects of the ancient world when applied in certain strategic ways, but we have to be honest about the category's origins and not pretend that it somehow organically and magically arises from our sources."[6] Such a cautionary note does not mitigate the rich theological perspectives in the many texts that date from the Second Temple period. The fact that the sources do not reflect a gulf between "religion" and other forms of human experience actually highlights the profound nature of faith perspectives in these ancient texts. One of the aims of this study is to demonstrate that economics, politics, and complex beliefs in a higher power interact frequently in the biblical sources and other works, and one should not attempt to separate these strands too neatly.

Another pertinent issue is the treatment of sources prior to or beyond the period under consideration. Although one can define the Second Temple period with major historical bookends (the return from exile around 532 BCE and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE), it will be necessary to probe earlier and later evidence in order to assess social and economic life. For example, one cannot understand the perspective on economics in the book of Nehemiah without considering the import of antecedent legislation in the Pentateuch. Nor do the woe oracles in the Epistle of Enoch (*1 En.* 92–105) make sense unless one recognizes the employment of this literary form in eighth-century-BCE prophets like Amos. Along similar lines, the rabbinic texts often shed light on sources from the Second Temple period. The references in the Mishnah and the Talmud help us to contextualize the understanding of marriage in such documents as the contracts from Elephantine or

6. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 153. One can and should make generic distinctions in examining literature from this period, and in certain sources cultic activities receive far greater attention (e.g., the priestly laws of Leviticus). Yet Nongbri's caution is a welcome reminder that even generic categories like Wisdom literature were not seen as "secular" in the ancient world.

the book of Tobit.[7] Similarly, many of the New Testament books postdate the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and yet these sources are helpful for understanding economic life in Judea under the Romans.

Along similar lines, we will analyze texts where the date of composition remains uncertain. Disagreement over the exact period for certain sections in the Pentateuch is one example (e.g., the Holiness Code in Lev. 17–26), as are the dates for the books of Proverbs and Ruth. With regard to the Wisdom literature, there is widespread agreement that the sayings in Proverbs came together before and after the exile. Scribal sages worked under Israelite kings (e.g., Prov. 25:1, "proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied"), but the collection continued to take shape after the exile, especially during the Persian period (the same is true for the Pentateuch).[8] The period for the book of Ruth is also uncertain, although recent studies have forcefully argued for a postexilic date.[9] Our discussion will point to the creative manner in which Ruth wrestles with pentateuchal legislation as a counter to the more rigid perspectives in books like Ezra and Nehemiah, suggesting the Persian period as the most likely composition date.

In assessing all of this material, we will point to persistent stratification in Judah, with most households engaging in farming pursuits under challenging conditions. Persons of privilege, especially those who curried favor with local officials and foreign rulers, stood to benefit from their connections, while most of the population lacked access to such possibilities. Lopsided lending arrangements and taxation demands exacerbated the challenges of living in the region, and many sources from this period reflect considerable tensions between rich and poor. In the midst of this challenging economic climate, we will highlight the relationship between economics and the social visions of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (and other important texts). Those who placed their faith in the God of Israel understood economic issues through the lens of fidelity to the commandments. Second Temple sources indicate an ongoing debate over how to live in the world, with all of its hierarchies and financial challenges, and remain faithful to the call for benevolence that the tradition demanded.

7. Most commentators put the editing of the Mishnah around 200 CE.

8. Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 6.

9. P. H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, BZAW 416 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), surveys the content of Ruth and how it relates to the dynamics of both the preexilic and postexilic landscape; he argues convincingly that the Persian period is the most likely date of composition.