

# The Economy of First-Century Palestine: State of the Scholarly Discussion

22

PHILIP A. HARLAND



## Introduction

STUDENTS OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY in the first centuries have become increasingly aware of the need to position their subjects in relation to concrete realities of life, including economic realities. The economic realities of Palestine (encompassing Judaea, Samaria, and Galilee) had drawn the attention of scholars in several fields in the interwar years, but there has been a resurgence in attention since the 1960s. The purpose of this chapter is to sketch in broad strokes the state of the question regarding our knowledge of Palestine's economy, outlining some key issues of debate among scholars and pointing toward some directions for future research. Though in several respects our knowledge of economic realities in first-century Palestine has increased, especially in connection with issues of land, agriculture, trade, and taxation, several ongoing areas of debate, unsolved problems, and methodological difficulties remain. In general Palestine's economy, much like that of other regions in the Roman Empire, was agrarian, based on peasants producing food, but there is room for considerable debate over other features, including the level and importance of trade.

## Conceptual Preliminaries

The ancients did not discuss the economy and economic issues in the way that moderns do. From their viewpoint the modern compartmentalization of life into political, social, economic, and religious sectors would be difficult to comprehend; these aspects of life in general comprised a unified whole for those living in first-century Palestine. Thus, as Douglas E. Oakman suggests, "it is necessary to acquire a special set of conceptual lenses when reading ancient literature, including the Bible, in order to perceive appropriately the nature and character of ancient

economics" (1991: 34). The definition of economy that is used here would not have occurred to a person in the ancient context. Scholars of antiquity must define the economy in their own terms, while being very aware that they do so, so that the overall workings of ancient societies can be made comprehensible in the present.

For purposes of surveying recent developments in the study of ancient economies and the social sciences, Carney defines an *economy* as "that complex of activities and institutions through which a society manages the production and allocating of goods and services, and organizes and maintains its workers. . . . 'The economy' is not just an aggregate of individuals' actions. Groups, and overall societal interests, are involved" (1975: 140). Politics, power, and social structures are closely related to the nature of the economy since specific groups in a society may attempt to maximize society's utilities, production, and distribution to their own advantage over other groups. In connection with this, the economic situation of specific groups in society, whether groups of peasants or aristocrats, tenants or landowners, hired laborers or craftsmen, will be important.

Since the late 1950s the social sciences have paid greater attention to the nature of peasant societies and have organized a new subdiscipline within anthropology, economic anthropology (cf. Carney 1975; Herskovitz 1952; Wolf 1966; Oakman 1991). Economic anthropology and social scientific studies of peasant societies have provided important insights into the nature of economies in preindustrial societies, some of which are relevant here.

With respect to the social scientific study of ancient economies, Max Weber, as early as 1896, addressed such issues in *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* (1976; cf. Weber 1952). Works on comparative economics, particularly the studies included in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957), have been very influential, as has the work of Polanyi (1968). As Carney notes, Polanyi's work basically caused the concept of "economy" in preindustrial society to be redefined along the lines of Carney's definition given above (1975: 139–42). Overall, Polanyi helped to provide a framework for conceptualizing various types of ancient economies or economic exchange systems, including reciprocity, redistribution, and market economies.

There are other social scientific studies of peasant or agrarian societies that are notable for their subsequent influence on students of Judaism and Christianity in antiquity. These include Robert Redfield's *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956), which presents the subsequently influential concepts of "great" and "little" traditions, reflecting elites and peasantry perspectives respectively; Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson (1985/1989/1999) and David Fiensy (1991), for instance, are indebted to Redfield in their analyses of economic relations in first-century Palestine. Eric R. Wolf's anthropological study *Peasants* (1966) explains from a Marx-

ian perspective several economic aspects of peasant societies, especially the mechanisms of subsistence-level farming; Oakman's (1986: 49–54) study of the economic context of Jesus draws on this in constructing helpful economic models of the peasant freeholder, tenant, and wage-laborer. Also influential is Gerhard Lenski's *Power and Privilege* (1966), which presents a macro-sociological conceptual framework for discussing social stratification in peasant economies; ancient historian G. Alföldy (1985) adapted Lenski's model for use in studying the bifurcated social stratification of the Roman Empire, and Fiensy (1991: 155–76) develops the model for analysis of Palestine in the Herodian period.

## Overview of the Secondary Literature

A brief overview of the more important secondary literature is also in order. Studies dealing with the economy of Palestine can be roughly divided between the pre- and post-World War II eras; economic questions regarding this region were addressed by scholars of both early Christianity and Judaism, as well as some classicists. F. C. Grant's *The Economic Background of the Gospels* (1926) was among the earliest works to deal with such issues; it remained the standard work on the subject for scholars of the New Testament for nearly fifty years. J. Klausner's essay on "The Economy of Judea in the Period of the Second Temple" held a similar position of influence within the realm of Jewish studies; his survey of the economy, which made extensive use of rabbinic sources for economic realities in earlier centuries, argued that there was "enormous progress both in agriculture and in commerce" (1975 [1930]: 205).<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, J. Jeremias (1969 [1933]) produced his work on Jerusalem in Jesus' time, giving considerable attention to economic conditions and the social stratification of Jerusalem. F. M. Heichelheim (1938), a classicist, dealt with Palestine in his paper on the economy of Roman Syria, arguing that the various districts in the province were economically interdependent. Roughly concurrent with these works on Palestine were those dealing with the economic situation in the empire as a whole, including studies by M. Rostovtzeff (1941, 1957 [1926]), T. Frank (1927, 1936–38), Heichelheim (1958 [1938]), and A. H. M. Jones (1948).

In the postwar years, and especially since the 1970s, there was a burgeoning of interest in social and economic history. Within Jewish studies, Arye Ben-David's *Talmudische Ökonomie* (1974) dealt with the economy reflected in later, rabbinic material; Daniel Sperber (1978, 1991 [1974]) covered issues concerning money, pricing, and land from 200 to 400 C.E. Martin Goodman addressed economic issues in his *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A.D. 132–212* (1983). More relevant for the first century are the essays by Shimon Applebaum (1976, 1977, 1989), discussed more fully below. Most recently, Jacob Neusner (1990) and Ze'ev Safrai

(1994) have researched economic issues as reflected in the Mishnah and Talmuds with very different approaches and results, as we shall see.

Scholars of early Christianity and of the Jewish war (66–70 C.E.) have especially contributed to our knowledge of the economic situation in first-century Palestine. A series of studies by Richard A. Horsley (1979, 1981, 1987, Horsley and Hanson 1985/1989/1999) gives considerable attention to economics in explaining the context of the Jesus movement and other developments in the first century, including banditry and the Jewish war. Still others have concentrated on evaluating the connections between the economic situation in Judaea and the revolt, including Heinz Kreissig (1968, 1970, 1989), who focuses on economic causes from a Marxian perspective, and Martin Goodman, who focuses on the failure of the Judaeen aristocracy (alongside other economic and social factors) as the main cause of the war. Several other works approach economics as a means of shedding light more specifically on the context of Jesus and the early Christians, including Sean Freyne's book on Galilee (1980), G. Hamel's *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine* (1990 [1983]), and Douglas E. Oakman's *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (1986). David A. Fiensy's study of the *Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period* (1991) focuses on shifting patterns in land tenure and how these changes affected the living conditions of the peasantry in the first century.

Once again, research on Palestine since the 1970s coincided with, and was influenced by, studies dealing with economics in the Roman Empire generally. Among the more influential, general works were those by A. H. M. Jones (1974, gathering earlier papers), Ramsay MacMullen (1974a, 1974b), R. Duncan-Jones (1974), and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix (1981/1983). Perhaps most influential from a theoretical perspective was M. I. Finley's *Ancient Economy* (1984 [1973]), which outlines the general characteristics of ancient economic arrangements in terms of a primitivist model, reflecting insights from economic anthropology (covering a period ranging from c. 1000 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.). We will discuss a few other more specialized studies of recent years as we proceed.<sup>2</sup>

## The State of Our Knowledge on Palestine's Economy

In surveying the secondary literature on the economy of Palestine, several ongoing issues of concern and debate stand out. These include (1) the agrarian nature of the economy, (2) the relative significance of trade, (3) the distribution or ownership of land, and (4) the social-economic conditions of the peasantry, including the impact of taxation. Through a discussion of agreements and disagreements among scholars in these areas, we will gain a better picture of the state of our knowledge of the economics of Palestine around the beginning of the Common Era. The economy of Palestine should not be understood in isolation; de-

spite regional peculiarities that may be identified, this region was part of the larger economic world of the Roman Empire, and social-economic conditions in the region have their counterparts elsewhere in many respects.

First, the ancient economy of Palestine was an underdeveloped, *agrarian economy* based primarily on the production of food through subsistence-level farming by the peasantry. The peasantry, through taxation and rents, supported the continuance of a social-economic structure characterized by asymmetrical distribution of wealth in favor of the elite, a small fraction of the population. Peasants made up the vast majority of the population (over 90 percent; see Kreissig 1970: 17–87; Fiensy 1990: 155–76). The peasantry included *small landowners* who worked their own land for the subsistence of their families, *tenants* who worked the land of wealthy landowners and paid rent, and a variety of landless peasants who either worked as *wage laborers* on large or medium-sized estates or resorted to other activities such as banditry. The elites, consisting of the royal family, aristocrats, religious leaders, and some priests, drew their primary source of income from medium-sized and large estates. Absentee landlords, living in the cities and benefiting from production in the countryside, were common in this social-economic structure.

Production in Palestine centered on the labor of the peasant household to produce essential foods. The principal products included grain (wheat, barley, millet, and rice), vegetables (onions, garlic, leeks, squashes, cabbages, radishes, and beets), fruits (olives, grapes, figs, and dates), legumes (lentils and beans), spices (salt, pepper, and ginger), and meat (fish, cows, oxen, lambs, goats; cf. Klausner 1975 [1930]: 180–86; Hamel 1990 [1983]: 8–56). The peasant's diet consisted mainly of bread and salt, along with olives, oil, onions, and perhaps some grapes (Hamel 1990 [1983]: 34–35). Distribution of produce and wealth was unequal. And, as emphasized by Oakman (1986) and Halvor Moxnes (1988), the type of exchange or distribution within the economy of Palestine seems best characterized in terms of Polanyi's model of redistribution through a central institution. That is, wealth in the form of rents, taxes, and tithes flowed toward urban centers, especially Jerusalem (and the Temple), and was redistributed for ends other than meeting the needs of the peasantry, the main producers. The city's relation to the countryside in such an economy, then, would be parasitic, according to this view.

This overall agrarian quality of the Palestinian economy coincides with the general character of economies in other parts of the Roman Empire as portrayed by ancient historians. According to Rostovtzeff one of the most striking features of the economic and social life of the empire

is the capital importance of the part played by agriculture. It is no exaggeration to say that most of the provinces were almost exclusively agricultural countries. . . .

[We] may safely affirm that the largest part of the population of the Empire was engaged in agriculture, either actually tilling the soil or living on an income drawn from the land. (1957 [1926]: 343)

Yet despite the general recognition that agriculture was of prime importance, there are several theoretical debates directly pertaining to the agrarian nature of the Roman economy. In particular, considerable scholarly discussion centers on the degree to which ancient economies were qualitatively and/or quantitatively similar to or different from later medieval, early modern, and modern economic arrangements. Closely linked with this issue is the relative importance of trade or commercial activity alongside agriculture. This “modernist” vs. “primitivist” debate provides a context for our discussion of scholarly work on Palestine’s economy.

On the one hand is the “modernizing” model or approach of Rostovtzeff. “The ancient world experienced, on a smaller scale, the same process of development which we are experiencing now. . . . The modern development [including capitalism] . . . differs from the ancient only in quantity and not in quality” (cited by Reinhold 1946: 363–64). Hence the free use of terminology drawn from modern capitalistic economies (e.g., “capitalism,” “bourgeoisie,” “proletariat,” “mass production”) to speak of the ancient Roman economy, as well as an emphasis on trade or commercial enterprise as a principle source of wealth (cf. Reinhold 1946: 362–68; D’Arms 1981: II–I3).

The “primitivist” model of economy was developed, in part, as a reaction to this “modernizing” approach, but it also draws heavily on insights from economic anthropology. For Finley (1984 [1973]), who is quite representative and influential here, the ancient economy was fundamentally different from subsequent economies (e.g., medieval) not only in quantity but also in quality; it was primitive in line with what we know of other peasant economies—so much so that we are at a loss to make sense of the ancient situation in modern terms. According to this model, as Donald Engels explains,

the classical world was innocent of many market values and institutions. Classical peasants lived at the margin of human existence and had little or nothing left over after they paid their taxes, rents, and maintenance. Therefore, classical cities could not have been supported by the voluntary exchange of peasant surplus for urban goods and services, since the peasant had little or no surplus at his disposal and no knowledge of a market. (1990: 1)

In such a primitive economy, the city’s relationship with the countryside was, primarily, a negative, parasitic one; this is the model of the “consumer city” drawing on resources of the countryside through taxation and rents. The primitivist model

has become the dominant view within scholarship in recent years, largely due to Finley's influence (cf. Garnsey and Saller 1987).

Naturally there is a range of scholarly opinion regarding the merits of these two models. Several recent studies propose a more nuanced approach to the question, challenging the primitivist model of the ancient economy as proposed by Finley while also rejecting the modernizing approach of Rostovtzeff (cf. D'Arms 1981). H. W. Pleket and his students, for instance, point out shortcomings in Finley's stark differentiation between ancient and other economies, suggesting that we "may have made the ancient economy too primitive and pre-industrial Europe too modern" (Pleket 1984: 35; cf. Pleket 1983 and Nijf 1997: 11–18). Engels's (1990) recent case study of the economy of Corinth criticizes the widespread acceptance of Finley's primitivist model, particularly regarding the dominant notion of the "consumer city." Instead he proposes further case studies testing alternate models, such as the notion of the "service city," which was "supported by the voluntary exchange of peasant surpluses for urban goods and services" (1990: 1–2). In light of such debates, scholars of Palestine's economy should keep in mind John H. D'Arms caution: "Granted that the Roman Empire was a preindustrial economy—it nonetheless exhibits signs of complexity, order, and system in its institutions, to an extent which makes labels like 'primitive' inappropriate unless they are carefully qualified" (1981: 13). This theoretical debate concerning the nature of ancient economies brings us to the next key issue raised in studies of Palestine's economy.

Although the Palestinian economy centered on agriculture, *trade* was also important. Part of the difficulty in assessing the role of trade in Palestine, as with other aspects of the economy, is that our sources lack the qualitative and quantitative information necessary to evaluate the extent and level of trade on a local or "international" scale. Some scholars such as Grant (1926: 72–75) and S. W. Baron (1952: 250–55) tend to downplay involvement in external or foreign trade based partially on isolated references or prohibitions in the literature (cf. Hamel 1990 [1983]: 97–99 for critique). Josephus, for instance, states the following:

As for ourselves . . . we neither inhabit a maritime country, nor do we delight in merchandise, nor in such a mixture with other men as arises from it; but the cities we dwell in are remote from the sea, and having a fruitful country for our habitation, we take pains in cultivating that only. (*C. Ap.* I.60)

We need to remain attentive to the difficulties in moving from rhetoric to reality. Josephus's statement regarding Palestine's lack of trade and later rabbinic restrictions on foreign trade may not be fully reflective of reality. Josephus is writing with an apologetic purpose in mind, and the rabbinic prohibitions should be understood

as representing the ideals of the rabbis rather than the real situation with respect to trade, which, evidently, was common enough to warrant the prohibitions. Those who take Josephus's reference at face value fail to recognize the apologetic motive in describing Palestine exclusively in terms of agricultural activities. There is a common inclination among ancient authors who discuss agricultural activities, including Cato (*Agr.* 1.2–4), Cicero (*Off.* 1.150–51), Varro (*Rust.* 2.10.1–3), and Columella (*Rust.* 1.1–17); “treatises on agriculture and morality . . . manifest hostility in differing degrees to trade as a source of income” (Garnsey and Saller 1987: 45). D’Arms’s study, *Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome* (1981), for instance, shows how attitudes among, or statements by, elite authors (concerning the need for aristocrats to remain aloof from trade) are quite distanced from the social realities of actual conduct (contra Finley); there is considerable evidence that equestrians and even senators were participants in trade to various degrees (cf. Pleket 1983, 1984 on elite businessmen in the Greek East). So actual trade in Palestine would likely be more significant than Josephus’s rhetoric would lead us to believe, as we shall see further below.

In contrast to those who consider trade negligible, scholars such as Klausner (1975 [1930]: 199–200), Kreissig (1970: 57–74), and Applebaum (1976) give more attention to evidence that foreign trade was a significant, though not predominant, aspect of economic activity in Palestine. A distinction should be made between evidence of trade *within* Palestine and trade on a more international scale; it is the degree of international trade that is most debated.

Applebaum’s survey of archaeological and literary evidence for imports and exports, for foreign or international trade, is illustrative of the situation, though his conclusion that “[e]conomic activity was predominantly internal” is debatable (1976: 669–80, largely followed here). Regarding imports, Egyptian grain was occasionally imported in times of shortage or famine (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.299–316 [25 B.C.E.], 20.51–52 [46–47 C.E.]), but Palestine was largely self-sufficient for such food staples. The Temple cult required considerable imports, as I discuss below. With respect to clothing, later references in rabbinic literature to sandals from Tyre and Laodicea, goat-hair from Cilicia, and fine linens from Pelusium and India are suggestive of possibilities in the first century. Among the most common items in daily use in antiquity was pottery, so it is significant that archaeological excavations at Samaria, Schechem, Ptolemais, and Ashdod uncovered red glaze both from the east (in the Hellenistic and Roman eras) and from Italy and Gaul (in the Roman era); a stamped jar from Colonia Hadrumetum in North Africa found at Joppa (second century or earlier) is also suggestive of such imports. As Applebaum notes, Palestine was lacking in metals (except copper) and we can assume the import of all necessary ones. The principal exports from Palestine were olive oil (cf. Josephus, *B.J.* 2.591, *Vita* 74–76), dates, opobalsam, and spices. The



Jericho region was renowned for its dates and date-wines, which were in high demand in Rome (cf. Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.763.41; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 13.44–49). Products from the opobalsam bush, grown in the Dead Sea area, were exported, including the sap, twigs, and bark, which were used as medical remedies for headaches and problems with eyesight (cf. Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 12.111; Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.763). By the fourth century, Gaza and Ascalon became well known for their wines. Long-distance luxury items from East Africa, Arabia, India, and the Far East would also pass through Palestine following the usual trade routes.

After surveying this evidence for imports and exports, Applebaum concludes that, although there are indications of limited trade, economic activity in Palestine was “predominantly internal.” We need to be more cautious, however, in generalizing from partial and fragmentary evidence; it is often difficult to know whether a particular item among the limited evidence we have should be viewed as representative or exceptional. I would suggest that we need to leave open the possibility that future archaeological work and regionally focused studies may show that trade, including international trade, was more significant than scholars have often thought.

There are other indications of the significance of trade that are worthy of mention here. In many respects, Jerusalem and the Temple were the hub of commercial activity and trade in Judaea. Heavy demands for sacrificial victims for the Temple cult meant that cattle and sheep would have to be imported from elsewhere when local supplies of livestock were short, and incense, consisting of ingredients from various localities (including Ethiopia and India; cf. Applebaum 1976: 674), would also need to be imported. Peter Richardson notes the demands for goods, both domestic and international, associated with the Temple:

There was heavy traffic from pilgrims to Jerusalem at the major festivals, probably in increasing numbers through the first century B.C.E. and C.E. as the *pax Romana* brought easier travel, more disposable income, and fewer border problems. This meant that Judeans had very large demands made upon them for good roads, lodgings, food, water, and sacrificial victims such as pigeons (doves), sheep, and cattle. Jerusalem was . . . the economic center for taxation, trade, and international links. (1996: 135)

The influx of large numbers of Jews from cities throughout the Mediterranean Diaspora would likely bring with it important social and business network connections to other regions of the empire.

Furthermore, some of Herod’s large-scale constructions were designed to foster an increase in trade of a more international character. Richardson notes several potential areas where Herod’s attention was drawn to commerce and trade, including the area north of the Winter Palace at Jericho; but most significant was the artificially constructed harbor at Caesarea Maritima, with its harbor installations, warehouses, and stores (1996: 188–91). This was Herod’s “showpiece city;

it was a major outlet to the Mediterranean, home for the Judaeen navy, the largest harbor in the Mediterranean. Produce, trade, and people flowed in both directions" (1996: 178). Projects and activities of this sort would set the stage for an increase in international trade to, from, and through Palestine in the first century. Trade was likely more significant than often recognized.

But why was international trade not even more predominant in such an economy? The answer appears to lie in the subsistence orientation of much agricultural production in Palestine as in other areas of the empire. According to a qualified primitivist model of economy, the majority of the population lived from the produce of the land with little surplus to sell. As well, the economic situation of the peasantry was not conducive to the regular purchase of imported goods, which would be purchased mainly by the wealthy. Much of the produce extracted by large landowners would be sold to the nonagricultural populations of the city on a local basis if possible rather than exported. Once again, this characteristic seems reflective of other provinces in the Roman Empire, as Garnsey and Saller note, where "agricultural areas inevitably aimed at subsistence rather than the production of an exportable surplus. . . . In general, the backwardness and expense of transport and the relatively low level of demand limited opportunities for profitable investment in commerce" (1987: 44). This statement should be qualified somewhat in connection with our earlier discussion of the primitivist model. Still, in light of this picture of the empire generally, the suggestion that Palestine is a special case in regard to limited trade due to religious factors or prohibitions, as Grant and Baron suggested, is unnecessary.

Returning to the characteristics of the agrarian economy, a third issue addressed by scholars relates to trends in *land ownership*. Many scholars argue that there was a tendency toward the concentration of more land in Palestine into the hands of fewer large landowners at the expense of peasants.<sup>3</sup> Grant identifies lack of land as a cause of economic distress in the years preceding and during the first century (1926: 66), and Klausner identifies forfeiture of land due to indebtedness as a main cause of peasants losing their land and of larger landowners increasing the size of their estates (1975[1930]: 188–89). Kreissig, too, points to the trend toward large estates and an increasing gap between small and large landowners, though he is hesitant to identify any of the large estates as official "royal lands" (i.e., lands in the possession of the current monarch or emperor, often inherited from the preceding dynasty; 1970: 26–27, 31). Applebaum (1976: 633–38, 660–61), Freyne (1980: 165), and, above all, Fiensy (1991: 21–73) convincingly argue that large estates were prominent and on the increase in the years preceding the first century and that they included both royal lands, some of which were given to loyal aristocrats as gifts, and aristocrats' large estates. Fiensy does a good job of plotting out the locations and extent of royal estates known from archaeological

and literary information. He identifies royal estates in the Jericho region; the Plains of Esdraelon; western Samaria; Batanea, Gaulanitis, and Trachonitis; the coastal regions; and Idumea and Perea. According to many scholars, the main consequences of this direction in land tenure included an increase in landless peasants and hence of tenancy, day labor, and banditry (cf. Horsley and Hanson 1985/1989/1999: 48–87; Hamel 1990 [1983]: 151–63; Oakman 1986: 72–77; Fiensy 1990; on banditry in Palestine and the empire see Richardson and Edwards, ch. II, in this volume; Isaac 1984; Shaw 1984).

Once again, this concentration of land ownership within Palestine was part of the larger picture of the Roman Empire as identified by several ancient historians, including Rostovtzeff, MacMullen, and Finley. Rostovtzeff, for instance, notes that there was a

general tendency throughout the Empire towards the concentration of land in the hands of a few proprietors who lived in the cities. . . . The land was owned by men who were not themselves experts in agriculture but were townsmen for whom land was a form of investment. (1957 [1926]: 344)

The issue of peasant landlessness brings us to a fourth main point regarding the economy: namely, the *social-economic conditions of the peasantry* in Palestine. It is generally acknowledged by most scholars that the economic situation of the peasantry was a precarious one due to subsistence-level farming and various expenses including taxes, rents, and seed, as well as the threat of natural disasters and famine.

The fragmentary nature of the evidence when it comes to quantifiable estimations of taxation, rents, and other expenses helps to explain the difficulty in assessing the economic situation of the peasantry and the varying results of scholars on the extent of the tax burden. In general, Grant, Klausner, Horsley, Applebaum, and Freyne tend to emphasize the extremely burdensome economic situation of the peasantry. New Testament scholars following the lead of Grant, including Horsley and Hanson (1985/1989/1999: 52–63), are inclined to provide, without explanation, a high estimate of as much as 40 percent or more of produce going for taxation and religious dues. On the other hand, scholars such as E. P. Sanders, Hamel, and Oakman are more explicit in stating the calculations behind their estimates. In Sanders's calculation, which seems reasonable, the estimated total burden on the average peasant (assuming a 12.5 percent yearly land tax including taxes and tithes) was no more than 28 percent in most years and, in the worst-case scenario, a total of about 33 percent (1992: 146–69), considerably less than Horsley's calculation of well over 40 percent for the average peasant each year.

Oakman's calculation of taxation is similar to Sanders's, ranging from 20 to 35 percent (1986: 68–72). Oakman suggests that the average amount of produce remaining for subsistence may have ranged from one-fifth to as low as one-thirteenth

of the produce based on a yield of 1:5. Oakman provides some useful estimates regarding the peasant family's various expenses, including rents and seed, and regarding the land that would be necessary to fulfill a peasant family's expenditures and food needs (1986: 61). By his estimate, a minimum subsistence plot would have been 1.5 acres per adult, *not* including land that would lie fallow (an additional 1.5 acres per adult) and not including land for the added expenditures of seed, taxes, and rents (1986: 61–66).<sup>4</sup> Oakman suggests that the average seed-to-yield ratio for the Palestinian peasant would have been about 1:5 (cf. Heichelheim 1938: 128; Hamel 1990 [1983]: 127–29). One-fifth of unit production (of each year's yield), therefore, would go toward the seed replacement fund of the next year. Oakman checks his original estimate of 11 bushels of wheat necessary for subsistence per person per year against these hypothetical yield ratios and finds that the calculation is about the same: 1.8 bushels of seed per acre (amount of seed known to have been used in planting) x 1.5 acres (subsistence plot per person) x 5 (fivefold yield) = 13.5 bushels – 1.8 bushels (seed replacement fund) = 11.7 bushels available per year. However, further expenses would be drawn from this amount, including fodder for the peasant's livestock, a reserve for bartering and purchasing various goods and services, and the Temple tithe of one-tenth. These expenses, together with seed replacement, would equal *approximately three-tenths of the harvest* not including rents and taxes, which would range from 20 to 35 percent of total produce by Oakman's estimate. Having outlined these conditions for peasants, it is important to point out that Palestine was not exceptional in its subsistence-level farming and in the various expenses including taxation and rents, which were also faced by peasants in other provinces of the empire.

## Methodological Difficulties and Cautions

The works surveyed here raise several methodological issues. First, one of the main difficulties faced by any historian of the ancient world pertains to the nature of our sources, which are fragmentary, partial, and reflective of particular perspectives. The literary sources we do have represent only a haphazard selection from particular places at specific times. For Palestine in the first centuries, there are the Gospels, which were not necessarily written in Palestine and may, therefore, reflect conditions elsewhere; Josephus's writings, which represent the viewpoint of an ancient historian writing (in Rome) from an elite perspective; and various other Christian and Jewish writings that are of unknown date and provenance. For later centuries there are rabbinic writings, the Mishnah and Talmuds, which are problematic for writing the history of the first century; although some of the material preserved within them represents earlier periods, they also represent the viewpoint and sociohistorical setting of the authors or redactors of the material in the third

century and beyond. Generally lacking are literary sources representing the perspectives of the peasantry; most sources available for Palestine, perhaps with the exception of some strata of the synoptic Gospels, represent elite perspectives on economic and other conditions, perspectives that were sometimes characterized by a negative view of the peasantry or “people of the land” (*am-ba-aretz*).

Archaeological evidence should play a key role in writing social and economic history. Hamel and Fiensy, for example, illustrate the value of archaeological material in shedding light on ancient economics and the daily living conditions of peasants in Palestine. Fiensy draws extensively on archaeological findings for his survey of large estates (1991: 21–74). Nevertheless, the *realia* available regarding life in the peasant village are also fragmentary. Moreover, the picture of the economy and economic conditions that is drawn from the literary and archaeological evidence we do have is still a partial one.

A second main difficulty in reconstructing a picture of the ancient economy or economic conditions is the lack of (reliable) economic information in the sources we do have. Unlike the modern historian, ancient authors were not interested in presenting an economic history or in providing a collection of economic data, because the modern concepts of economy and economics did not exist in antiquity. Finley notes the care the historian must take in using apparently quantifiable evidence due to the “indifference of most ancient writers to economic matters as well as . . . their casualness and carelessness in giving numbers” (1984 [1973]: 30). Although Finley may overstate the point, he is correct in emphasizing that references to economic conditions and quantifiable economic information are only incidental and can be misleading. Most of the evidence for the ancient economy, then, is indirect.

This leads us to a third main methodological issue in regard to the use of ancient sources for economic and social history. It is essential to ask why the ancient author provided particular information that the historian then considers as evidence for social or economic history. Finley’s comments on the nature of the primary sources and the historian’s use of them are insightful:

The first question to be asked about any document is about the reason or motive for its having been written. That question is not asked often enough, because it is unconsciously assumed that motives and purposes are self-evident, that is to say, that they are more or less the same as our own. On the contrary, I would argue that in antiquity the purpose of all documents was either to communicate some information (or misinformation) or to memorialize something, but not to provide data for policy-making or for analysis, past, present or future. (1985: 32)

Finley’s comments are applicable to some of the works discussed in this chapter. For example, the debate about the extent of trade based on a passage in

Josephus, discussed earlier, is an illustration of the failure of some scholars to ask the reason or motives underlying the presentation of material by an ancient author.

The use of rabbinic literature in writing social and economic history illustrates the importance of recognizing both the ancient author's motive or purpose in writing and the related issue of the possible gap between the author's ideal presentation and the real social and economic situation, between rhetoric and reality. Its use in historical reconstruction has been a continuing issue, from Klausner's and Heichelheim's seemingly uncritical use of this literature to reconstruct the economy of the Second Temple period to Hamel's more critical use to shed light on village life in Palestine of the first three centuries. A comparison of source-method in the recent works of two scholars of rabbinic Judaism, Jacob Neusner and Ze'ev Safrai, will provide a fitting conclusion to this section on methodology and the use of sources.

Safrai's monograph, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (1994), approaches the issue of the economy on the assumption that the talmudic sources can be used extensively as representative of the *real* situation when studied critically. Safrai points out that he is following in the methodological path of other Jewish historians including A. Büchler (1912) and G. Alon (1980). Safrai focuses primarily on talmudic literature, alongside archaeological information, to reconstruct various aspects of the economy of Palestine in the period from 70 C.E. to about 350 C.E., with a focus on the latter part of this period. So, for example, Safrai believes that the Jerusalem Talmud, written sometime in the fourth century, contains historically accurate information (which can be separated from other less useful material) regarding the actual economy in an earlier period.

Jacob Neusner's methodological views are quite different. He applies historical-critical methods in the study of Judaism in late antiquity, something that is not often the case, he feels, in the field of Jewish studies. In contemporary Judaic studies, "we routinely deal with premises last found plausible in biblical studies more than 150 years ago" (1991: 70). The application of source, redaction, tradition, and historical criticism, along the lines of the application of these methods in New Testament studies, is essential to the study of rabbinic literature and Jewish history in his view.

Neusner's approach to the economics of the Mishnah greatly contrasts Safrai's. In *The Economics of the Mishnah*, Neusner approaches his subject based on his assessment that the Mishnah represents the *ideal*, not the *real*: "the authors of the Mishnah tell us how people saw and imagined things, not how things actually were" (1990: 33). Hence to study economic issues in such literature is to study not the actual situation but the authors'/redactors' own ideal perceptions of how economic and other activities should be done. According to Neusner, the rabbis

who produced the Mishnah and Talmuds were an elite group removed from the actual situation of the villages in Palestine and, in connection with this, were also unable to ensure the implementation of their suggestions in any nonelite community far removed from them.

Although Neusner's opinions on the genre of the Mishnah and on the specific worldviews he perceives in it are not accepted by all other scholars (see Sanders [1990] on precisely these points), some of Neusner's critical perspectives regarding the use of the rabbinic material for social or economic history are shared by others. Goodman, for example, also makes a similar observation with respect to the use of rabbinic material by historians: "It is an undue credulity about rabbinic effectiveness in social matters that has led to most of the faults in earlier studies and, in particular, to frequent reliance on selected single quotations and laws taken out of context to support theories of social, economic, and religious history" (1983: 8).

How, then, can the rabbinic material (or other literary sources such as the New Testament and Josephus, for that matter) be used in writing social and economic history? The usefulness of the rabbinic materials appears to lie somewhere between the views of Safrai and Neusner. Neusner is correct in suggesting that a social history regarding the economic ideals of the authors or redactors of the rabbinic material can be written, and Safrai is correct in suggesting that references to the actual situation can be found in the literature when analyzed carefully. That is, this literature, like any other, can be useful for social and economic history when used critically with an awareness of the motive of the author or influence of the author's worldview on the material being used. However, the later rabbinic material cannot be uncritically used to reconstruct social and economic realities of earlier centuries. It is essential that the scholar apply historical-critical methods, including source, redaction, tradition, and historical criticism, to the material that is being used in order to differentiate the date of particular material from the date of composition or redaction. Comparison with other literary and, especially, archaeological evidence should play a key role in the evaluation of specific evidence, both for identifying the worldviews that may shape the material and in identifying material that reflects the social or economic realities of particular times and places.

## Future Directions for Research

Although a considerable amount of study has been done on economics in Palestine (particularly in the first century but also in rabbinic times), there are several areas that deserve more attention. First, archaeological findings need to be more fully integrated into our understanding of the economy (cf. Applebaum 1976:

631). Some scholars tend to focus on literary evidence to the neglect of artifactual evidence, and when archaeology is used there is a tendency to interpret it in light of literature (e.g., Finley 1984 [1973]; see the critique by Frederiksen [1975: 170]). Artifactual evidence should be considered on its own terms and may, instead, provide alternate perspectives on social and economic life to those we encounter in the literature. Archaeological finds may, for instance, provide important clues regarding the degree to which international trade was important in particular localities of Roman Palestine. Regionally focused case studies of particular cities, villages, and regions may provide a more nuanced picture of local and international trade and commerce.

Second, further research of economic issues in Palestine should be done on macro- and micro-levels and on relating the results to historical developments. On the macro-level, further steps can be taken, along the lines of the research of scholars such as Oakman and Fiensy, to conceptualize the overall structures of the economy and social-economic arrangements in Palestine, particularly with help from the social sciences. Developing explicit models of the ancient economy in Palestine in light of research on the nature of economic arrangements in other ancient Mediterranean societies and in view of the specific economic aspects of Palestine may assist in making sense of disparate economic “facts”; this may be helpful in drawing attention to some of the otherwise less visible dynamics of the economy and of social-economic activities.

On the micro-level, further research into economic aspects of daily village life or the “economy” of the average peasant, along the lines of Hamel’s research on food and clothing, will shed further light on the activities and situation of the vast majority of the population. A deeper knowledge of the economic situation of the peasantry will also assist in understanding various phenomena such as banditry, which was also quite common in other areas of the empire.

A third main area requiring further research is *comparison* of the economy and social-economic situation of Palestine with other regions of the Roman Empire. The economic situation of the peasantry deserves comparative attention since some scholars, such as Kreissig and Horsley, appear to place considerable importance on the social-economic plight of the peasantry in explaining social and religious movements particular to Palestine, as well as the Jewish war itself. Such comparative study would help to place the economy of Palestine as we understand it into the overall economic arrangements of the empire, shedding light on both the unique and the typical in regard to economic issues in Palestine.

Finally, the majority of studies on the economy of Palestine concentrate primarily on the situation in the first century and take a synchronic approach to their study. Several scholars utilize their synchronic analysis of economic conditions in explaining key events of the time, especially the Jewish war. Still needed, however,



is a more broadly based diachronic analysis of the economy of Palestine, making note of the key points in the history of that region that shaped social-economic arrangements. Such an attempt, though admittedly difficult due to the fragmentary nature of our evidence, may help to show how changes in economic aspects influenced other sociohistorical developments over time, again in relation to trends in the empire as a whole.

### Notes

I would like to thank Peter Richardson (University of Toronto) who directed my attention to the economy of Palestine in the first place and who provided numerous and insightful suggestions for an earlier version of this chapter. Anthony J. Blasi was helpful in reworking the earlier work into the present form.

1. Earlier, Emil Schürer (1885 [1983]) had dealt with economic issues in his monumental work. Büchler (1912) had focused his attention on economic issues pertaining to land ownership and demography in the years following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

2. For more complete bibliographies on the Roman economy, see Garnsey, Hopkins, and Whittaker (1983), Garnsey and Saller (1987), and Parkins and Smith (1998).

3. Scholars are not always clear on the meaning of their terminology for the size of plots of land. H. Dohr's definition of plots is useful (see Fiensy 1991: 24): small = 6–50 acres; medium = 50–315 acres; large = over 315 acres.

4. This figure can be compared with Ben-David's estimate of 16.8 acres for a family of six to nine people (1974: 44), which, unlike Oakman's figure, includes half the land as fallow as well as produce from the land necessary to pay taxes and rent while subsisting comfortably (cf. Hamel 1990 [1983]: 134–36). Fiensy, on the other hand, is more inclined toward the more modest estimate of S. Dar who, based partially on archaeological findings, suggests that peasant (freeholder) families sometimes owned just 6 acres of land (1991: 94–95). Fiensy suggests that many peasant families would be required to seek supplementary income from other sources in order to subsist.

