

# The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> *and*

<http://purl.org/jhs>



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## VOLUME 10, ARTICLE 8

**PHILIPPE GUILLAUME,  
NEHEMIAH 5: NO ECONOMIC CRISIS**

## NEHEMIAH 5: NO ECONOMIC CRISIS

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of crisis has long been a favourite of social-scientific (biblical) exegetes and has informed much of their work in reconstructing ancient Israelite history. Contrary to historical criticism that usually focuses diachronically on relations of cause and effect over time, social-scientific exegesis most often focuses synchronically on the way meaning is generated by social actors related to one another by a complex web of culturally-determined social systems.<sup>1</sup> The mother of all crises in social-scientific exegesis of the HB is the one caused by the consolidation of the monarchic state in the eighth century BCE in Israel and Judah. The rise of an urban elite at the court of Samaria and then at Jerusalem is understood as introducing social stratification in Israelite society, increasing the fiscal burden of the peasants, and spurring a prophetic reaction. For historical reasons related to the context in which the social-scientific method arose in biblical studies, the image of the prophet as a champion of social justice caught the exegetical imagination and had some political impact, at least in the microcosm of biblical exegesis.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of crisis was also read back into the emergence of early Israel in the Iron Age I. The breakdown of the Eastern Mediterranean trade system supposedly spurred a peasant revolt.<sup>3</sup> These peasants withdrew into the highland to raise goats and start an egalitarian counter-culture that smelt of patchouli more than of manure. Post-Colonialists and Agrarians have replaced hippies and Socialists, but the growing concern for ecological matters provides

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<sup>1</sup> S.C. Barton, *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 277.

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Elliott, "On Wooing Crocodiles for Fun and Profit," J.J. Pilch (ed.), *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001), 5–20; N.K. Gottwald and R. Boer, "Political Activism and Biblical Scholarship: an Interview," R. Boer (ed.), *Tracking the Tribes of Yahweh* (JSOTSupS, 351; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 157–71.

<sup>3</sup> N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

ever new openings for biblically minded prophets.<sup>4</sup> As prophets need crises to thrive, it is not surprising that a scholar has now stretched the duration of the biblical crisis to the entire Persian and Hellenistic eras culminating during the Roman period.<sup>5</sup>

This article calls into question the scholarly tendency to multiply or lengthen crises. In particular, it focuses on Persian Yehud and the description of a putative economic crisis in Nehemiah 5. This text has attracted much attention. Contrary to the widespread agreement that the text reflects an acute social and economic crisis, this article argues, on the grounds of historical studies, that the crisis Nehemiah tackled existed mainly “on paper,” that is, in the biblical text and in critical, social-scientific studies of this text. This is not to deny that farmers often faced natural and political calamities, but the subsequent famines can only be deemed crises if the term is used in a rather loose manner. This loose use of the term has led scholars either to multiply supposedly historical crises or to dramatically increase their temporal span. As they do so, the term itself becomes less and less helpful and even, at times, misleading for historical research, as the present article demonstrates in the case of Nehemiah 5.

### THE TALE

Reading Nehemiah as an independent composition, Margaret Cohen identifies fifteen tales that structure the entire book in the style of Herodotus and other historiographers of the fifth century BCE. Nehemiah 5 covers tale six (Neh 5:1–11) and tale seven (Neh 5:14–19) and juxtaposes a dialogue and an autobiographical monologue with generous outpourings of emotions ‘that may be sincere, but are certainly also purposefully crafted to work within the larger narrative structure.’<sup>6</sup> Nehemiah 5 interrupts the story of the wall construction to stress the need to separate the people from the practices of the *gōyīm*.<sup>7</sup>

### The Problem

Verse 1 introduces the story as an outcry of the people (העם) and their wives against ‘their brothers the *Y<sup>e</sup>hūdīm*’ (אחיהם היהודים). The translation ‘Jewish kin’ is a problem because it focuses on

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<sup>4</sup> E.F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> W.R. Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God* (LHBOTS, 466; New York: T.&T. Clark, 2007), 149–50.

<sup>6</sup> M. Cohen, “Leave Nehemiah Alone,” M.J. Boda and P.L. Reditt (eds), *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah* (HBM, 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 74.

<sup>7</sup> D. Janzen, “The Cries of Jerusalem,” M.J. Boda and P.L. Reditt (eds), *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah* (HBM, 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 131.

ethnicity at the expense of the equality that is stressed again in v 5a: 'Now, as the flesh of our brothers is our flesh and as their sons are our sons.' The complaint is lodged by people who consider themselves as equals but who claim that they are being short-changed by their Jewish brothers. This Jewish brotherhood represents a close circle, the social and economic elite gravitating around the Persian administrative centre at Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

Verses 2–4 begin with the words **יש אשר אמרים** "there are some who are saying" (Neh 5:2,3,4). Scholars like to see in the threefold rumour three successive phases of economic degradation, but it requires reading **ערבים** 'pledge [our sons and daughters; cf. NJB]' for **רבים** 'many' in v 2, a reading devoid of textual support.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the text lists three typical situations of economic duress. First, a group with numerous sons and daughters insist that they need to take (**לקח**) wheat to survive. A second group mortgages (**ערב**) fields, vineyards and houses to take grain during the famine. They have fields, vineyards and houses, therefore they are neither poor nor destitute. The last group borrows (**לוה**) silver to pay the king's tax. Their fields and vineyards are mentioned at the end of the verse without connection with the preceding phrase. None are destitute. What they need is credit. Crisis is not the problem, because they have assets to secure loans and there is no indication that loans are not forthcoming. There is no mention of foreclosure or of drying up of credit. Verses 2–4 set the stage for the story by presenting three standard procedures that are not problematic in themselves. Were the resenders poor and destitute, they would not have access to credit because no one lends to the poor.

The problem does not reside in credit but in a feeling of injustice expressed in v 5. Verse 5 begins with **ועתה** 'now' to mark that the crunch comes at this point. The borrowers complain that their children are not treated as the children of their brothers. They object that they are being forced (**כבשים**) to sell their own children to serve as slaves (**והנה אנחנו כבשים את בנינו ואת בנותינו לעבדים**). The problem is not the impressing of children but favouritism. The discontents suggest that the progeny of influential families managed to escape some tasks that their children could not escape. Such accusations would be preposterous if the people who filed the

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<sup>8</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, "Temple and Society in Achaemenid Judah," P.R. Davies (ed.), *Second Temple Studies 1* (JSOTSupS, 117; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 47.

<sup>9</sup> I.L. Seeligman, "Darlehen, Bürgschaft und Zins in Recht und Gedankenwelt der Hebräischen Bibel," I.L. Seeligmann and E. Blum (eds), *Gesammelte Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel* (FAT, 41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 327; W.J. Houston, *Contending for Justice* (LHBOTS, 428; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 29. The proposal has a long history, see, for instance, the discussion (and rejection of the proposal) in L. W Batten, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (ICC, Edinburgh: Clark, 1913), 238.

complaint did not consider themselves as part of the elite as much as Nehemiah.

### The Governor's Reaction

Verses 6 and 7 underline Nehemiah's angry reaction. After mastering his hearty emotions (וימלך לבי עלי) rather than 'thinking it over' (NRSV), he immediately brings charges "against the nobles (*hōrīm*) and the officials (*s<sup>g</sup>ānīm*)." Their wrongdoing is economic but the ambiguity of the term משה with *sin* or *shin* and final *aleph* or *heb* in the various textual traditions opens a range of translations from 'charging interest,' 'requiring pledges to secure loans,' 'foreclosure and seizing of collaterals' to 'pressing for repayment.' Roots נשה and נשא do not necessarily imply interest.<sup>10</sup> The problem is not these standard practices as such. The problem is their use in financial dealings with brothers (איש באחי). Nehemiah accuses the *hōrīm* and *s<sup>g</sup>ānīm* of selling their brothers to the *gōyīm* when they should be rescuing them (v 8).

After a pious admonishment of the culprits, Nehemiah states that he and his entourage are also lending silver and grain (v 10 נשים). Given the extremely favourable portrayal of the governor in the book that bears his name, it is unlikely that Nehemiah is confessing any wrongdoing.<sup>11</sup> Rather than exculpating himself and his family of the abuses he denounces, he takes the lead in soothing the taxpayers. Nehemiah exhorts the *hōrīm* and *s<sup>g</sup>ānīm* to imitate him in giving up (נעזבה נא) interest, pledges, foreclosure or immediate repayment (משה). The *hōrīm* and *s<sup>g</sup>ānīm* are convenient scapegoats, taking the blame after which the narrator can present Nehemiah as the paradigmatic generous patron.

### The measures taken to deal with the problem

The imposed measures are loosely related to the problems reported in the first verses. Instead of sending the sons and daughters who escaped conscription to work with the others, the fields, vineyards, olive groves, houses, silver, grain, and oil should be 'returned' (השיבו נא), like the houses, fields and vineyards of Jer 32:15.<sup>12</sup> This is not the reversal of a process of concentration of land. The return concerns the collaterals used for the repayment of antichretic loans. In light of the common practice at the time, the fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses were not seized by creditors. Land in itself

<sup>10</sup> C.D. Gross, "Is there any Interest in Nehemiah 5?," *SJOT* 11 (1997) 270–78; R. Kessler, "Das hebräische Schuldenwesen Terminologie und Metaphorik," *Wort und Dienst* 20 (1989), 57–69; reprint in R. Kessler, *Studien zur Sozialgeschichte Israels* (Stuttgart: bkw Bibelwerk, 2009), 31–45.

<sup>11</sup> Gross, "Interest?," 275.

<sup>12</sup> T. Reinmuth, *Der Bericht Nehemias. Zur literarischen Eigenart, traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung und innerbiblischen Rezeption des Ich-Berichts Nehemias* (OBO, 183; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 2002), 132.

had no value and lenders were interested in securing labour rather than land.<sup>13</sup> The notion of the rich extending loans to the poor to despoil them of their meagre possessions is based on the modern notion of banks as institutions making money by lending money at higher interest rates than the rates at which they borrow. No such systems existed in the ancient world where interest rates were determined by custom rather than by the market.<sup>14</sup> Seizing the debtor and selling him abroad would have defeated the whole point of lending.

Therefore, the return imposed by Nehemiah involved assets mortgaged to secure loans serviced through predetermined portions of yields. There is no transfer of ownership back to the previous owners. Repayment is deferred or the interest abandoned. By adding the demonstrative pronoun to *masā'a* (הַמֶּשֶׂא הַזֶּה) it is fairly clear that the relief measure is a one-off instance. Nehemiah proposes to stop the clock until the forthcoming grape, olive, and grain harvest so that the burden does not accrue during the famine. Apart from that, the description of the practical measures remains on a general level. The narrator does not delineate a concrete set of measures but presents a typical situation. Nehemiah requires the end of 'inappropriate demands for repayment of loans in a time of financial stringency.'<sup>15</sup> What is appropriate is of course a matter of appreciation. What is clear, however, is that Nehemiah's 'solution to the economic crisis defies reality,'<sup>16</sup> unless the reality postulated by the narrator is different from the economic reality modern readers imagine.

The famine alluded to in v 3 cannot have been as serious as the complainers suggest since Nehemiah enacts his measures to make sure that the work on the wall continues. Had the famine

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<sup>13</sup> M.I. Finley, "Die Schuldknechtschaft," H. G. Kippenborg, *Seminar: die Entstehung der antiken Klassen-gesellschaft* (Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 130; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 180–81. P. Steinkeller, "Money-lending Practices in Ur III Babylonia: the Issue of Economic Motivation," M. Hudson and M. Van de Mierop (eds), *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: 2002, pp. 109–37. M. Van De Mierop, "A History of Near Eastern Debt?," in M. Hudson and M. Van De Mierop, *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: CDL, 2002) 82; C. Wunsch, "Debt, Interest, Pledge and Forfeiture in the Neo-Babylonian and Early Achaemenid Period," M. Hudson and M. Van De Mierop (eds), *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda: CDL, 2002) 250; S. Faroqhi, "Indebtedness in the Bursa Area, 1730–1740," M. Afifi et al. (eds), *Sociétés rurales ottomanes* (Cairo: IFAO, 2005) 208. Not yet available to me, M. Jursa (ed.), *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC* (AOAT, 377; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> J.M. Renger, "Comments on Economic Structures in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Orientalia* 63 (1994) 191.

<sup>15</sup> Gross, "Interest?," 277.

<sup>16</sup> J.M. Halligan, "Nehemiah 5," P.R. Davies (ed.), *Second Temple Studies 1* (JSOTSup, 117; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 152.

been really severe, the payment of the King's tax would have been postponed or cancelled as was commonly the case (see below). Nothing is said about the 'enslaved' children of v 5. The silence is all the more significant since, in his indictment, Nehemiah mentions Jews sold to *gōyim* and contrasts 'our' buying (back) of these brothers (strangely, the word redemption is not used) to 'your' trading of brothers (v 8). N.K. Gottwald suggests that because they had been sold abroad, nothing could be done about the unfortunate daughters.<sup>17</sup> But since the *ketib* of v 2 mentions no slavery, this is special pleading.

### CONFRONTING COMMON SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC READINGS OF NEHEMIAH 5

R. Albertz has written an impressive discussion of Nehemiah 5 which he takes as a historical report of a major economic crisis in the fifth century BCE brought about by the financial reform of Darius. Albertz lists other biblical texts as evidence of a continuing structural crisis in the days of Nehemiah while admitting in a footnote that 'Unfortunately, it is impossible to give an exact date to the texts mentioned.'<sup>18</sup> Despite the uncertainty of the date, Albertz is confident that the conflict was:

[n]o episode, but a far-reaching and long-lasting social crisis which shook post-exilic Judah to the core. The creeping decline of increasing numbers of population, which at time became acute, to a level below the minimum needs of existence, grew to an abuse which could no longer be overlooked by anyone who held a position of responsibility in the community.<sup>19</sup>

As dating prophetic oracles is far too precarious to confirm the existence of a crisis in the eighth century BCE, Nehemiah 5 is used as confirmation for an eighth century crisis that would have continued unabated into the Persian period. Albertz postulates that traditional smallholdings had aimed at self-sufficiency and were thus unable to shoulder the extra costs entailed by the obligation of paying a tribute in silver coins.<sup>20</sup> The amount of the tribute was fixed in advance without heed to the actual yields of the harvest. The conscription for building the walls of Jerusalem made the crisis worse.

Albertz' claim is a faithful reflection of Nehemiah 5. No taxpayer is likely to brag being rich. A crisis narrative may disguise the

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<sup>17</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> The crisis proof-texts are Isa 29:17–24; 35:1–2; 58:4–9; 59:1–21; Mal 5:3; Pss 37:7–33; 94:5–21; 109:2–3; Job 7:2–3; 14:6; 20:19; 22:6–7; 29:17; 31:16–20. R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (London: SCM, 1994), 636.

<sup>19</sup> Albertz, *Tribes*, 497.

<sup>20</sup> Albertz, *Tribes*, 496.

actual financial situation rather than reveal it. A decade *before* Albertz' work on Nehemiah 5, a specialist of the economy of the Persian era warned that sweeping views of crushing taxation, silver shortage, and general impoverishment before and after Darius' fiscal reform are flawed.<sup>21</sup> He preached in the desert. The common social-scientific readings of Nehemiah 5 perpetuate the academic view of the hapless peasant who is unable to adapt to new situations and is victimized by rulers who, blinded by greed, are unable to see that their own welfare depends on the welfare of their people. That greed motivates rulers and farmers alike and that people are not always very rational in the pursuit of their own interests are valid generalizations for all periods. It is also true that farmers consider themselves victims of the 'system' and that no farmer in his (or her) right mind will admit being comfortably prosperous. That rulers never have enough silver in their coffers is also a standard representation. In these conditions, the crisis depicted in Nehemiah 5 is too congruent with stereotypes to be taken at face value. The following points contradict the notion that Nehemiah 5 reports an economic crisis.

#### **The Walls of Jerusalem Were Repaired during a Slack of Farming Activities**

Albertz' claim that one of the causes for the crisis was the introduction of conscription for building the walls of Jerusalem is contradicted by the fact that there was enough idle time between sowing and harvest to make sure that work gangs were conscripted outside these peaks of labour. Neh 6:15 dates the completion of the wall on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in the fifty-two days between August 11 and October 2 when the Sabbaths are excluded.<sup>22</sup> This sets the work between the grain harvest and the next ploughing season. Although it is not certain that the crisis described in Nehemiah 5 is meant to be understood in temporal sequence, taking it as such places the crisis towards the end of July, halfway between the grain and the grape harvest.<sup>23</sup> If, as it stands in its present context, the financial crisis is related to the extra burden involved by the restoration of the walls, the direct effects of the conscription would have been less serious than Albertz claims because it was carefully timed to avoid taking people away from their fields when they were most needed there. Other than in the case of an imminent attack, no ruler or governor would drag the farmers away from their fields during the harvest to work on the walls.

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<sup>21</sup> M.W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire* (Leiden: NINO, 1985), 143–45.

<sup>22</sup> D.J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 176.

<sup>23</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 255–56.

### Self-sufficiency Includes the Ability to Shoulder Extra Costs

Albertz's claim that traditional smallholdings aimed at self-sufficiency and were thus unable to shoulder the extra costs entailed by the obligation of paying a tribute in silver coins is based on a faulty understanding of self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency implies more than the production of enough food to tide over one's dependants until the next harvest. At any period, smallholdings are geared to produce surplus because farmers are unable to know in advance the extent of the yield they will reap under the highly irregular Mediterranean rainfall. Hence, whatever the size of their holdings, farmers plough and sow more than what would theoretically be necessary for the expected yield. Claiming with Albertz that 'small farmers had to cut things down to the bone simply to get by, and it only took very slight additional difficulties like failures in the harvest or conscription for building the walls to upset their precarious situation over a broad front'<sup>24</sup> robs ordinary farmers of basic planning skills that their sheer survival across the millennia demonstrates they possessed and applied successfully. No doubt, these farmers would have concurred with Professor Albertz' analysis that their situation was very precarious. Yet, farmers survived by anticipating harvest failures and the conscriptions of all sort that they routinely encountered. Well before the Achaemenids arrived on the scene, self-sufficient farmers integrated the various taxes, rents, interests as well as unforeseeable expenses into their calculations of the surface they needed to plough and the amount of seed they should sow each year, or they would not have been self-sufficient at all. If the obligation of paying taxes and dues in coin rather than in kind involved extra costs, these costs would have to be measured against the overall economic situation before the actual burden they represented to the farmer's budget could be evaluated. Were we ever in a position to evaluate these extra costs, the fresh economic opportunities resulting from Persian operations in Egypt may have offset the extra costs. Unfortunately, reliable quantitative studies will probably never be refined enough to allow any meaningful calculation of such costs.

H. Kippenberg's idea that the obligation to pay taxes in silver coins impoverished farmers and was one of the causes of the crisis in Nehemiah 5 has given rise to some weird explanations.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Smith states:

the Darian innovation of silver currency... may have brought about a growing impoverishment of farmers who had to produce more surplus to exchange for silver (explicitly mentioned in Nehemiah 5) to pay taxes, and thus encourage the indepen-

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<sup>24</sup> Albertz, *History*, 496.

<sup>25</sup> H. Kippenberg, *Religion und Klassenbildung im antiken Judäa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 49–53.

dence of small families who could produce more surplus rather than be responsible for more mouths to feed.<sup>26</sup>

Kippenberg's notion has long been discarded since coinage did not discontinue the weighing out of bullion.<sup>27</sup> One should also underline the rather faulty logic underlying the idea that farmers could produce more while feeding less mouths. In a system characterized by the absence of tractors and chemical fertilizers, and the presence of an unlimited supply of arable land, the availability of manpower is the most crucial factor for the rise of production. Starving families to raise input defies all economic logic. If Neh 5:2 correctly equates an abundance of children with greater food requirements, Smith's deduction that feeding more children entails fewer surpluses to trade is simply wrong. As long as farmers are not forced to send their children to school, the food requirement of children increases proportionally to their work capacity. Neh 5:5 is quite clear that it is not the work of children that was resented but its remuneration and how it benefited their parents. Having many children was crucial to access credit since they were pawned to secure antichretic loans. Hence, there is no mention of children in the list of returned assets in Neh 5:11–12 because child labour was not the problem but the solution, despite the (tearful) mention of children and daughters in vv 2–5. Moreover, several arguments militate in favour of an overall improvement of the economic situation in the second part of the Persian era.

First, it is not production but the conversion of agricultural surplus into lasting assets that poses the greatest challenge. Typically, agricultural surpluses have little intrinsic value since they mature all at the same time and their value decreases proportionally to their abundance. Farmers know how to produce. What farmers are not very good at is trading their surplus production beyond the immediate bounds of their region so as to benefit from geographical price differentials.

The second factor is geopolitical. Wars negatively impact agriculture and trade in the area where they are fought, but they have a very positive impact on the neighbouring areas. The integration of Palestine into a large Empire had positive effects on the rural economy, entailing a sharp reversal of the situation when the same area was a contested theatre of war.<sup>28</sup> As much as the economic buoyancy experienced in Syria-Palestine during the seventh century BCE was the direct consequence of the Neo-Assyrian annexation, the integration of Egypt into the Persian Empire altered the strate-

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<sup>26</sup> D.L. Smith, "The Politics of Ezra," P.R. Davies (ed.), *Second Temple Studies 1* (JSOTSupS, 117; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 96.

<sup>27</sup> K. Hoglund, "The Achaemenid Context," P.R. Davies (ed.), *Second Temple Studies 1* (JSOTSupS, 117; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 61–62.

<sup>28</sup> P. Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army," *BSOAS* 70 (2007), 63–88.

gic position of the southern Levant from a depleted Neo-Babylonian buffer zone to a vital route. The major campaigns Persian troops waged in Egypt further enhanced the economic position of Palestine by raising the demand for local surpluses. Therefore, the famine of Nehemiah 5 reflects many an episode but not a structural crisis.

### Positive Effects of Coinage

The impact of the monetization of the economy is extremely hard to gauge.<sup>29</sup> The requirement to pay taxes in silver reflects the generalization of trade and an increasing number of urbanites who grew less of the food they ate or an increasing amount of people drawing revenues besides the food they grew. In principle, this does not imply that the producers lost out when the state transferred upon them the responsibility of the realisation of crops into silver. In fact, the contrary could be the case. Coinage encouraged lateral exchange among peers.<sup>30</sup> The monetization of the economy saved on a heavy administration and developed mainly where the central state was weak, where taxation was not based mainly on *corvée* and the system of redistribution was lacking.<sup>31</sup>

D. Rathbone shows that Egyptian rural estates extended monetization beyond the limit of the quantity of coin actually in circulation.<sup>32</sup> Although they handled only a limited amount of cash and paid their workers in kind, they provided their workers with credit advances as part of their strategy to build up a reliable manpower. The temple of Jerusalem could have operated along similar lines. By contrast, in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt the state continued to collect most taxes in kind in order to limit the rise of local markets and of urban networks specialized in non-agricultural activities that the state could not control as easily as agriculture.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See the contributions in P. Briant, F.M. Henkelman and M.W. Stolper, *L'archive des Fortifications de Persépolis* (Paris: de Boccard, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> A. Bresson, *L'économie de la Grèce des cités. Les espaces de l'échange* (Paris: A. Colin, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> J.C. Moreno García, "La dépendance rurale en Égypte ancienne," *JESHO* 51 (2008), 147.

<sup>32</sup> D. Rathbone, *Rationalism and Rural Society in Third-Century A.D. Egypt* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991), 327–28.

<sup>33</sup> S. von Reden, "The Politics of Monetization in Third-Century BC Egypt," A. Meadows and K. Shipton (eds), *Money and its Uses in the Greek World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70–73. J. Rowlandson, "Money Use among the Peasantry of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt," A. Meadows and K. Shipton (eds), *Money and its Uses in the Greek World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145–55. F. de Callataÿ, "L'instauration par Ptolémée Ier Soter d'une économie monétaire fermée," in F. Duyrat and O. Picard (eds), *L'exception égyptienne? Production et échanges monétaires en Égypte hellénistique et romaine* (Le Caire: IFAO, 2005) 117–33.

Hence, one could argue that Darius' reform provided greater leeway to peripheral areas such as Yehud, a leeway that, if it did not immediately translate into greater prosperity, would have at least afforded more economic freedom and openings to the individual farmer.

Contrary to the claim that the 'crisis' in Nehemiah 5 was caused by the forced repopulation of Jerusalem (Neh 11:1) that concentrated too many unproductive mouths into one place,<sup>34</sup> the new commercial outlets had at least as many positive as negative repercussions for the local farmers. In light of the nature of ancient cities as essentially large villages populated by farmers and in which much space was devoted to gardens,<sup>35</sup> the notion that urban mouths are unproductive should be dismissed. Even if monetization contributed to the rise of a non-agricultural sector in Jerusalem, these mouths were only unproductive from the point of view of grain production. Feeding them generated a local demand for agricultural surpluses as well as a local traffic of prebends in the form of leftovers of divine meals.<sup>36</sup> The rise of a demand for local food-stuff in Jerusalem would have enabled nearby farmers to market their surplus directly, while they had to rely on grain merchants to gain access to inter-regional markets.

#### **A Fixed Tribute is Adaptable at the Local Level**

The idea that provinces had to pay a tribute fixed in advance without heed to the actual yields of the harvest is equally problematic. Was the treasury greedy enough to expect the fixed tribute when the harvest failed? The notion of a fixed tribute derives from Herodotus 3.89 who claimed that, as a result of a reform by Darius I, all the countries of the empire were obliged to pay taxes in silver.<sup>37</sup> Although Herodotus' figure for Babylonia—1000 talents of silver annually—indicates a rounded figure that does not inspire any confidence in its reliability, the amount actually paid by each fiscal unit was carefully calculated according to the ability of each unit (see Plutarch *Mor.* 172f; *Arist.* 24.1). Darius learnt from the rebellions he crushed that setting the level of taxes on a fair basis was essential to the stability of the realm. He was the first ruler to pub-

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<sup>34</sup> Gross, "Interest?," 270.

<sup>35</sup> D. Ussishkin, "The Borders and 'de facto' Size of Jerusalem in the Persian Period," O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (eds), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 147–66.

<sup>36</sup> G. Van Driel, *Elusive Silver* (Leiden: NINO, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> According to Herodotus III 89–97, Darius introduced a fixed standard between Babylonian silver and Euboian gold which resulted in the rise of white silver in contrast to silver with a *ginnu* mark. A.C.V.M. Bongenaar, "Money in the Neo-Babylonian Institutions," J.G. Darcksen (ed.), *Trade and Finance in Ancient Mesopotamia* (MOS, 1; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1999), 173.

lish an official tribute register.<sup>38</sup> As far as we can see, it was realistic on the whole and nothing indicates that the level of taxation was more oppressive than during previous eras.<sup>39</sup> The amount of tribute was fixed at the level of the larger fiscal units and allowed for adjustment of the amount paid by each sub-unit according to actual regional yields as long as the overall sum was delivered to the central treasury. The greater and more varied a fiscal unit, the greater flexibility it offered to the tax-collecting authority to adjust the amount of tribute collected according to yield variations year after year.

The aim of fixing an amount in advance for each fiscal unit was to guarantee a regular income to the royal treasury, to limit the amount satraps could extract by shifting the responsibility for abuses upon their shoulders. The system required flexibility at the local level since taxation is the result of a constant bargaining process between taxpayers and tax-users, each side presenting itself as the victim of the other. Abuses are more blatant when they are practised by the more powerful partner, but at every level there is resistance and dragging of feet. The amount finally collected had to reflect actual yield variations and reflected the bargaining power of taxpayers, which was never nil. For common sense dictated that the taxation authority took into account the economic health of its tax base. Even when it was a punitive measure, a heavy tribute could only be a punctual measure that was bound to backfire if it was not followed by concrete demonstrations of clemency. Hence, the suppression of rebellions was routinely followed by temporary cancellation of taxes in spite of the fact that the rebels were defeated.<sup>40</sup> The devastations incurred by the military operations that crushed the rebellion punished the treasury as much as the farmers of the region concerned. The Achaemenids, just as any other dominant power, may have viewed their subjects as milk cows<sup>41</sup> but they still had to care for the cow to obtain its milk.

The Persians, as much as the Romans, had to consider the well-being of the numerous small farmers who constituted their tax base. The sovereign used the law to establish a more even playing field and facilitate the type of investment and cooperation that would lead to economic growth.<sup>42</sup> Although its ability to use the law to promote its interest in the form of fiscal revenues was sub-

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<sup>38</sup> P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 390–94.

<sup>39</sup> L.L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period 1* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 195–97.

<sup>40</sup> P.-A. Beaulieu, “Land Grant on a Cylinder Seal and Assurbanipal’s Babylonian Policy,” S. Graziani (ed.), *Studi sul vicino oriente antico 1* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 2000), 25–46.

<sup>41</sup> Grabbe, *History*, 197.

<sup>42</sup> D.P. Kehoe, *Law and the Rural Economy in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007), 194.

ject to broad constraints, the Roman state consciously sought to promote a particular distribution of resources, not simply out of concern for justice but rather as a policy designed to promote fiscal goals.<sup>43</sup> It is doubtful that the Persian Empire would have lasted if the Achaemenids did not share a similar concern for the well being of their tax base. If each year Darius actually received the amount fixed in advance, the regularity was the result of his subordinates' ability in steering between the imperatives of drawing revenues while avoiding social disturbances. The sheer territorial size of a large empire afforded it the luxury of a regularity of revenues that smaller political entities could never enjoy because regional production failures could be compensated with the revenues from further afield.

At the local level, the bargaining process was a bitter game. Taxpayers systematically complained that they were fleeced and when times were really hard, the satrap had to contribute from his own funds to make up for the missing revenues. This is exactly what is described in Neh 5:2–5. The tone of subordinates' relations to their superiors was by definition lachrymose. On the receiving side of the tax flow, the burden was set at a higher level in order to compensate for the loss of revenues through swindling and resistance. The fact that Nehemiah 5 mentions no tax relief illustrates the bargaining process between local taxpayers and local administrator. Although the king's tax is mentioned at v 4 as an aggravating factor, Nehemiah does not cancel it because a local governor did not have that kind of freedom. Instead, Nehemiah squeezes his own revenues to meet the expected amount of tribute by forsaking the governor's food allowance (Neh 5:14–19). Nehemiah claims that he did not collect his due for twelve years (a claim that is also congruent with the ideology of the text), it is obvious that he had other sources of revenues. Had it not been the case, how would he have continued serving as governor while daily feeding a hundred and fifty people (Neh 5 :17) if he had no revenues for twelve years in a row ? In any case, the way Nehemiah tackled the problem gives the lie to the common notion that farmers alone bore the brunt of the fixed tribute. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, satraps, governors, and other administrators had to steer an uneasy course between the exigencies of maximum tax extraction and social peace to preserve their positions and their lives.

If there is no doubt that farmers did not like paying taxes and had to cope with all sorts of challenges while doing so, there is no reason to suppose that the fifth and fourth centuries BCE were particularly tough for Palestinian farmers.

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<sup>43</sup> Kehoe, *Lam*, 195.

### No Destitute Farmer

Even if Nehemiah 5 did report an actual crisis, the situation depicted was far less dramatic than exegetes would have us believe. Gottwald explains that “The lethal combination of taxes and debts conspires to thrust many peasants into destitution.”<sup>44</sup> There are, however, no clues for destitution in Nehemiah 5. That the fields and vineyards in v 5 are said to be ‘for others’ (לאחרים) entails no expropriation and no destitution in the sense of the loss of one’s assets—or every person who mortgages a property would be destitute. The debtors were obviously creditworthy or they would not have received loans in the first place.

Keen to darken the picture and render Nehemiah even more righteous than the text does, Albertz qualifies the portion of the produce set aside for servicing the debts as ‘the lion’s share of the harvest.’<sup>45</sup> In fact, if the Athenian *hektemoroi* are anything to go by, it would not exceed a rough sixth or so within the following six months, or the creditor would have to extend more credit in the form of seed and food to keep his ‘milk cows’ alive. A similar proportion is mentioned in the story of Joseph’s enslavement of the Egyptians (Gen 47:13–26), and much later as the landowner’s share in pre-1958 Iraqi sharecropping contracts and as the share of the crop (17 %) due by the tribes that accepted to farm land in Raqqa at the end of the nineteenth century CE.<sup>46</sup> It seems that for millennia, the produce dedicated to servicing loans and rents oscillated between a sixth and a fifth of any harvest. Above that proportion, it made no sense to lend since farmers could not bear a greater burden.

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<sup>44</sup> Gottwald, *Tribes*, 2–3.

<sup>45</sup> Albertz, *History*, 495.

<sup>46</sup> A.P.G. Poyck, “Farm Studies in Iraq,” *Mededelingen van de Landbouwhogeschool te Wageningen Nederland* 62 (1962), 56; P. Steinkeller, “The Renting of Fields in Early Mesopotamia and the Development of the Concept of ‘Interest’ in Sumerian,” *JESHO* 24 (1981), 128; M. Ababsa al-Husseini, “Mise en valeur agricole et contrôle politique dans la vallée de l’Euphrate (1865–1946),” *Bulletin d’Etudes Orientales* 53–54 (2002), 464. I reject suggestions that the *hektemoroi* actually paid five-sixths of the produce and I stick to the obvious meaning of Aristotle’s phrase: the *hektemoroi* were bound to surrender a sixth of their produce (almost a double tithe) to an overlord and could be enslaved if they failed to do so: P.J. Rhodes, “The Reforms and Laws of Solon: An Optimistic View,” J.H. Blok and A.P.M.H. Lardinois (eds), *Solon of Athens: New Historical and Philological Approaches* (Mnemosyne Supplementum, 272; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), 248–60. See also J.-M. Roubineau, “Les hektémores,” J. Andreau and V. Chankowski (eds), *Vocabulaire et expression de l’économie dans le monde antique* (Paris: de Boccard, 2007), 177–210.

### AN ETIOLOGICAL “CRISIS”

Nehemiah’s silence over the return of slaves makes sense in the context of the repair of the walls. The word ‘slave’ in all ancient Near Eastern languages is ambiguous. It covers two very different realities, permanent and indentured servitude.<sup>47</sup> Instead of reading Nehemiah 5 as implying the permanent sale of daughters abroad, in the general context of the book of Nehemiah the pressure exerted by the lenders took the form of a general rounding up of every able body, children included, to carry baskets. Directly in charge of the project, Nehemiah had no interest in imposing the liberation of the debt ‘slaves’ and sending the workers back home. In spite of the famine, the impressment of workers and the payment of the king’s tax remained in force. The amount of grain, oil, wine, rent, and interest not collected could be compensated by the conscription for the restoration of Jerusalem. In this way, the reimbursement of produce to families who worked to build the walls of Jerusalem during periods of low agricultural activity was beneficial to the debtors who had large families. The families with a smaller workforce bore the rest of the burden of the reconstruction as an investment from which benefits could reasonably be expected since it secured a privileged access to the administration circles of the province.

The emergency measures Nehemiah takes to finance the restoration of city walls were quite common in such contexts. The narrator’s special contribution was to attribute the initiative exclusively to Nehemiah. A crisis was written as a backdrop for the portrayal of Nehemiah in a particularly favourable light. The crisis is a foil to render to Nehemiah what belonged to the Persian Caesar.

In favour of this interpretation, Josephus reports that the costs of a later restoration of the walls of Jerusalem were offset by a temporary tax-exemption granted by Antiochus III (Ant. 12.3.3 138–44). Unless one insists that the Persians were greedier than the Seleucids, it is likely that the measures imposed by Nehemiah to face the “crisis” were in fact standard administrative procedures. The costs involved in the setting up of a Persian *birtā* at Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes I<sup>48</sup> would have been compensated by a similar tax-relief to enable the local population to shoulder the burden of reconstruction while saving on the transfer of funds from the central administration to the periphery.

Had the famine been as severe as v 2 implies, the pawning of assets to pay taxes and reimburse loans in a time of food shortage probably went against common practice since farmers were not

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<sup>47</sup> P.J. King, “Slavery in Antiquity,” D. Schloen (ed.), *Exploring the Longue durée* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 243–49.

<sup>48</sup> D. Edelman, *The Origins of the ‘Second’ Temple* (London: Equinox, 2005), 332–50; D. Edelman, “Were Zerubbabel and Nehemiah the Same Person?,” forthcoming.

liable for acts of god.<sup>49</sup> Codex Hammurabi, law §48, states that cultivators were not obliged to pay their debts when the storm-god eroded or flooded their field or if the grain had not been produced through lack of water.<sup>50</sup> The same clause is found in the *ana ittišū* texts, scribal school-tablets preserved in the library of Ashurbanipal.<sup>51</sup> Roman and Byzantine texts also refer to the postponement of the collection of dues.<sup>52</sup> There is no need to imply that Hammurabi's laws were binding to Persian Yehud to suggest that the measures taken by Nehemiah were the least a governor would take during a famine occurring when the walls had to be restored. Commentators are fooled by the ideology of the text when they understand Nehemiah's measures as expressions of a deep piety rather than economic common sense. If pawning one's assets in order to buy grain was common practice, it does not entail that there was no let-up of imperial taxes in time of famine and that mortgaged properties were foreclosed when borrowers defaulted for reasons beyond their control.<sup>53</sup>

The question is whether the administration waited for the extra burden imposed on the province to turn into a crisis before acting to relieve it or whether it dealt preventively with problems that were easily foreseeable by granting some basic fiscal facilities to finance the building project. The historicity of the crisis in Nehemiah 5 hinges upon this question. That the text shows Nehemiah acting on his own accord and from purely religious motives is congruent with the ideology of the text and cannot be adduced to counter the notion that Nehemiah's decisions were standard procedures that any responsible administration would have taken.

The narrator is more interested in portraying Nehemiah as an ideal governor than in describing how a particular crisis was solved. Nehemiah's anger, his ability to master it in vv 6–7 and his immediate response belong to the rhetorical strategy of the text devoted to Nehemiah's justification of his financial conduct as governor. He is presented as the main lender who nevertheless decides to suspend the collection of dues in order to enhance his generosity. The phrase *אמן ויהללו את-יהוה* at the conclusion of the general

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<sup>49</sup> M. Hudson, "Reconstructing the Origins of Interests-Bearing Debt and the Logic of Clean Slates," M. Hudson and M. van De Mierop (eds), *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East* (Baltimore: CDL, 2002), 29.

<sup>50</sup> M.E.J. Richardson, *Hammurabi's Laws* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 58–59.

<sup>51</sup> R.P. Maloney, "Usury and Restrictions on Interest-Taking in the Ancient Near East," *CBQ* 36 (1974), 1–20.

<sup>52</sup> M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1992), 162–63.

<sup>53</sup> Against C.L. Seow, "The Social World of Ecclesiastes," L.G. Perdue (ed.), *Scribes, Sages and Seers* (FRLANT, 219; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 209.

assembly is the rhetorical aim of the entire chapter. It confirms Nehemiah as a righteous and generous governor and celebrates the return of the *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* among their Jewish brothers. The closing phrase “the people did as this thing” (v 13b) is certainly ‘unlogisch’<sup>54</sup> since it is not the people but the guilty *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* who are supposed to do what they promised. By melting the *hōrīm* back into the wider ‘people,’ Nehemiah becomes the guarantor of brotherly concord. As for the *sgānīm*, they are found at Nehemiah’s table in v 17.

Beyond the rather common measures enacted by Nehemiah, the theological statements that pepper the chapter (verses 9, 13, 15, 19) and Nehemiah’s long monologue (vv 14–19) where he compares himself to previous governors who ‘lorded it over the people’ (שלטו על העם) make excellent theology but poor economics. Carried away by the panegyric mood, the narrator gives up all pretence of verisimilitude. Out of his fear of the Lord and out of his own pocket, Nehemiah put all his servants to work on the walls (v 16) besides feeding a hundred and fifty officials with meat and wine without collecting his own food allowance (לחם הפחה) verses 14 and 17). Moreover, the measures he imposed on the *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* constituted yet an extra burden on his personal budget. Since Nehemiah also insists that he did not buy any fields (v 16), the reader is expected to conclude that for twelve years running, Nehemiah miraculously bore all costs without drawing any resources. Better than quails and manna, it was an ox, six sheep and fowls that turned up ready cooked on Nehemiah’s table daily.

The concluding verse is a shameless apotheosis. As a prayer addressed directly to God, it insists on all the good deeds Nehemiah has done to this people (טובה כל אשר עשיתי). Such a clear rhetorical purpose requires decoding. The text cannot be taken as straight social reportage.

### A Closed Circle of Brothers as the Jewish People

Since the text itself signals that it is not presenting a carefully investigated report of a particular situation, it would be unwise to use it as such. The situation could well reflect a particular episode, but in the context, it is more paradigmatic than actual since it is not precisely dated and it is not sure that it is in the correct historical sequence.<sup>55</sup> It is a narrative that explains the origin of the preferential credit facilities among a closed group of brothers.

The text demarcates several social circles rather than social classes. The core is Nehemiah with his brothers and his servants (נערי) v 10). Then, the *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* (Neh 5:7) are urged to move away from the disgrace of the *gōyīm* that are qualified as ‘our ene-

<sup>54</sup> K.D. Schunck, *Nehemia* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 156.

<sup>55</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 255.

mies' (v 9). Although the *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* are accused of doing 'no good' in v 9, in v 13 they are back in the fold. A larger group is constituted by the people that filed the complaint. Do they represent the entire population of Yehud?

The great assembly (קהלה גדולה) Nehemiah convoked against the *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* may give the impression that the entire population of the province was there to denounce the abuse of loan sharks. The narrator may well have suggested as much, but despite their presentation as the people (העם) in v 1, this is no 'am *baaretz*.<sup>56</sup> The people in Nehemiah 5 addressed grievances to brother Jews (אחיהם היהודים) and insisted upon their equality. Hence, the envisaged complainers are not marginal cultivators expropriated by larger landholders and merchants. As brothers they ask a favour on the basis of their equality and proximity with the lenders. This exclusive brotherhood was a close-knit group of affluent people to whom the governor belonged. The *sgānīm* and the *Yehūdīm* at Nehemiah's table in v 17 constituted a closed circle that drew revenues from the local administration. Their complaining brothers also wanted a stake in the revenues of the administration.

Nehemiah's claim that he and his entourage lent money and grain is essential to his presentation as an active member of the corporation and it shows that he was *not* 'above the fray' of contending parties.<sup>57</sup> Nehemiah, or the people who told his story and used him as their key figure, belonged to the group that decided to share the burden of the restoration of Jerusalem among its members, because it expected a quick return on investment. Their brotherly love excluded the rabble of the province as well as other elite that did not qualify as 'Jews.'

L.L. Grabbe suggests that Nehemiah may have bankrupted some of the creditors whose loans he forced them to turn into gifts.<sup>58</sup> We have no way of measuring the impact of the deferment of the collection of produce on the creditors, but Nehemiah's measures were not detrimental to the real lenders that stood behind the ideal figure of Nehemiah or the text would not have been written at all. Creditors do not threaten their best interest when they display some generosity. Nehemiah's measures maintained the *hōrīm* and *sgānīm* among their brother Jews while they excluded the *gōyīm* who need not be sought overseas. In the context of the restoration of Jerusalem around the reign of Artaxerxes, these *gōyīm* would have included the Benjaminite elite operating from Mizpah that administered the province for the Neo-Babylonians for over a century. The restoration of Jerusalem placed the Nehemiah group in direct competition with the Benjaminite elite. In later contexts,

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<sup>56</sup> Halligan, "Nehemiah 5," 148.

<sup>57</sup> Against Gottwald, *Tribes*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> L.L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), 191.

the *gōyīm* would represent other competitors, in Palestine or in the Diaspora.

In any context, Nehemiah 5 describes the genesis of a commercial association, in this case an exclusive group of Jews granting credit facilities to each other. Such associations are known across the ancient Levant through the biblical and extra-biblical *marṣeah* and the Greek *symposium* and *thiasos*.<sup>59</sup> While research has focus mainly on the funereal context of these institutions, the *marṣeah* had broader functions. To 'beat the market' and pool their resources, upper-class men formed closed associations of brothers under the patronage of a deity. Besides drinking wine, the members of a *marṣeah* conducted transactions involving large amounts of money, joint business ventures such as caravan (*harrānūt*) and maritime partnerships.<sup>60</sup> A similar group of brothers would have operated around the new temple and the Jerusalem *birtā*. If the crisis described in Nehemiah 5 does not reflect a particular event, the brotherhood of one-hundred and fifty *sgānīm* and *Yehūdīm* at Nehemiah's table represents real life Jerusalem entrepreneurs. They pooled resources in commercial joint ventures and granted preferential credit facilities to each other. In the Torah, a similar brotherhood is described in Lev 25:25–43 that exhorts the brothers to grant interest-free loans to each other in order to compete with other commercial brotherhoods.<sup>61</sup> The square of villains in Nehemiah 2—6 represents such competitors in Palestine.

In the Diaspora, Jews found themselves as small isolated groups, the brother and the fellow Jew were the same person. Therefore, the strict boundaries between the commercial brotherhood and the Jewish *ethnos* transmitted in Leviticus 25 and in Nehemiah 5 faded. Eventually, the ban on interest first decreed between brothers was generalized to cover commercial relations among all Jews, Christians and Moslems.

Besides this remarkable *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Nehemiah 5 became a paradigm of economic redress in liberation theology, a rather ironic turn considering that it was supposed to secure the exclusive control of the resources of a region by an exclusive circle of capitalists with Imperial backing.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> J. Carter, "Thiasos and Marzeah," S. Langdon (ed.), *New Light on a Dark Age* (Columbia: Missouri University, 1997), 72–112. H. Matthäus, "The Greek Symposium and the Near East," R. Docter and E. Moormann (eds), *Classical Archaeology towards the Third Millennium* (Amsterdam: Allard Pierson Museum, 1999), 256–60. J.L. McLaughlin, *The Marṣeah in the Prophetic Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001). L. Miralles Maciá, *Marṣeah y thiasos: Una institución convivial en el Oriente Próximo Antiguo y el Mediterráneo* (Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> McLaughlin, *Marṣeah*, 67.

<sup>61</sup> See P. Guillaume, *Land, Credit but no Crisis: Agrarian Finance in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Equinox, forthcoming).

<sup>62</sup> J. Severino Croatto, "The Debt in Nehemiah's Social Reform: A

## CONCLUSION

Exegetes tend to read the text as the description of an actual episode. From the episode, social-scientist exegesis builds a crisis lasting from the eighth century BCE to Nehemiah's time and beyond. Three centuries of continuous crisis, however, empty the notion of crisis of its substance. A structural crisis is aberrant from the point of view of the meaning of the adjective 'structural.' Crises can only be linked to a particular *conjoncture* or set of economic circumstances, F. Braudel's intermediate category of historical change between ephemeral events and the *longue durée*. In the absence of a meaningful and energetic intervention to deal with the causes of the situation, a crisis evolves into upheavals that correct the problem. A power that exerts too great a pressure on its constituents caves in to internal forces or is overthrown by the external enemy that had forced it to overtax its own economy. The historical structure is inscribed in the *longue durée* precisely because it survives the effects of short-term or cyclical economic crises. Wars and famines were the main causes of crises. Such crises were violent and brief but the economy had the ability to recover rapidly or the society in question simply disappeared from the record.<sup>63</sup> The use of the concept of crisis in Persian Yehud is justified as long as it is episodic rather than 'structural.' Nehemiah's repair of the walls of Jerusalem was a crisis in the sense that it was a turning point that inaugurated a new era. Rather than an economic or social crisis, it was a political crisis provoked by a change of local dynasties. The Benjaminite elite that had served the Neo-Babylonians lost its privileges to a new group that benefited from the backing of the Achaemenids.

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Study of Nehemiah 5:1–19," L.E. Vaage (ed.), *Subversive Scriptures* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1997), 39–59; G.R. Williams, "Contextual Influences in Readings of Nehemiah 5," *TynBul* 53 (2002), 57–74.

<sup>63</sup> C. Chandezon, "Guerre, agriculture et crises d'après les inscriptions hellénistiques," J. Andreau, P. Briant and R. Descat (eds), *La guerre dans les économies antiques* (Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges: Musée archéologique départemental, 2000), 239.