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3. The Political Economy of Peasant Poverty

What the Eighth-Century Prophets Presumed but Did Not State

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Introduction

Passages from the so-called eighth-century prophets – Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah – voice a substantial portion of the Bible’s discourse on peasant poverty. Several factors, however, tend to blur the picture they present for an untutored reader. While each of these books contains units most easily understood as generated in the eighth-century BCE, they all show evidence of having been recomposed significantly during the late Judahite monarchy and again in the Persian period. The concerns of royal “reform,” central to the first such re-composition, and of the Second Temple, dominant in the second, shift the focus of the finished text away from peasant poverty and toward monarchic nationalism and client-state cultus, respectively. Much scholarly ink has flowed to clarify these somewhat later dimensions of the text (see Chaney 2006: 145-46, and the works there cited).

Much less attention has been paid to another issue that also clouds the picture of peasant poverty in these prophetic texts. Even the passages with plausible claims to eighth-century composition *presume* and *allude to* the economic institutions and dynamics of their day, but nowhere describe them narratively or in full. The first audiences of these compositions had immediate knowledge of the social and cultural world presumed and addressed, and so had no need for such description. No modern reader, however, can simply presume such knowledge. Careful historical work is required for any twenty-first-century reader to understand the relevant context of this prophetic discourse on peasant poverty.

Recent interdisciplinary research into the dynamics of political economy in eighth-century Israel and Judah has begun to sketch the context that older passages in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah all presume and address, but nowhere describe. The dynamics of change as a whole are often referred to as a process of “agricultural intensification.” These changes include a number of elements that I will now undertake to discuss *seriatim*, but this organization into discrete factors is only for the sake of clarity in presentation. They are not independent variables, but rather *interdependent variables*, best understood as but facets of one integrated whole. Their interdependence is not only intrinsic to their reality; it is also a boon to historical research. Our sample of specific historical data is incomplete and skewed. Because so many facets of the institutional dynamics are closely intertwined, however, specific knowledge about the nature and direction of change in one dimension often allows us to posit what is going on in related dimensions with a high degree of probability.¹

Political and Military Context

Biblical Israel and Judah were petty monarchies whose misfortune it was to inhabit the land bridge where the regional powers of their world, Egypt and Mesopotamia, met and clashed. For much of their history, Judah and Israel could only *react* geopolitically to initiatives taken by their larger and more powerful neighbors. In roughly the second quarter of the eighth century BCE, however, Israel and Judah enjoyed a significant, if relatively brief, respite from big-power domination. They were also at peace with one another, Judah having become a virtual vassal of the larger and more powerful Israel. Both expanded their territories and grew in military power during the long and mostly concurrent reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel (ca. 781-745) and Uzziah of Judah (ca. 781-747). The regional powers were either at low ebb or occupied with affairs closer to home. That relative security from powerful foreign enemies, coupled with their long tenure in office, gave these two kings an opportunity to initiate change in their political economies.

¹ I have previously addressed the dynamics of political economy in eighth-century Israel and Judah in a number of venues (Chaney 1989, 1993, 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2009). The present discussion presumes and often summarizes or mirrors those earlier articles. For many of my dialogue partners in that work, see Chaney 2004a: 102, n. 12. Two recent sets of publication challenge the sketch presented here in whole or in part. I am convinced by neither set. Full engagement of their arguments here is impossible, since it would distort the shape and purpose of the present essay. Because both challenges are serious and learned, however, they should not be ignored. My less-than-satisfactory expedient, therefore, has been to summarize and critique each briefly in an Appendix to this essay, leaving fuller and more adequate response for future occasions. Please see that Appendix for more detail.

The situation changed just about the time they died. 745 B.C.E., the approximate year of Jeroboam II's death, was also the year of Tiglath-pileser III's accession to the Assyrian throne. That vigorous monarch quickly consolidated power at home, and then brought Assyrian might west to secure and expand its economic interests all the way from the Assyrian heartland to the port cities of the east Mediterranean littoral. In the wake of his powerful initiatives, Assyria would dominate affairs in Judah for more than a century and in Israel up to and including its demise. While Assyrian domination fundamentally altered the geopolitics of the region, Assyrian pressure, when it came, only intensified the initiatives that Jeroboam II and Uzziah had taken in their political economies. Military measures to resist Assyrian incursions and payment of tribute when these measures failed both tapped the same agrarian economic base.²

Import/Export Trade: Its Nature, Implications, Costs and Benefits

Jeroboam II and Uzziah had incentive as well as opportunity to change their political economies because of their active participation in international trade. The import/export trade of Israel and Judah in this period was mostly with and through the maritime city-states of Phoenicia, especially Tyre. Their seaborne transportation was much cheaper than any overland mode available (Nolan and Lenski: 181-83). Luxury goods, military matériel, and building materials for monumental architecture were the principal imports. Prominent among the latter were wooden timbers large enough to roof and panel temples, palaces, and other grand buildings. In the entire ancient Near East, such timber grew only in the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges. Access to it was controlled by the Phoenicians (Lipshitz and Biger 1991; 1995). To pay for their imports, the courts of Jeroboam and Uzziah exported foodstuffs and fiber, above all the triad of wheat, olive oil, and wine (Geva; Holladay: 380-382; Hopkins 1983; 1996; Noll: 265-70). A royal standardization of measures, and perhaps of weights as well, was instituted to expedite this seaborne trade in agricultural commodities (Kletter 1998).

Earlier, when the agricultural economies of Israel and Judah had functioned more at the subsistence level, storage jars had had no need to be exactly identical in volume. Since the foodstuffs they contained were stored and consumed near to where they were produced, the only constraints on the size of storage vessels were those of utility and practicality. Once significant interregional trade developed in the foodstuffs contained in such amphorae, however, economic efficiency dictated that they be made to a more uniform size. Archaeological remains witness such standardization in the Iron II period. Some of these amphorae are incised with the Hebrew letters *bt*, which spell the Hebrew name for the unit of volume they held (*bat*). Still others are incised with the Hebrew letters *bt lmlk*, spelling *bat lamélek*, “the *bat* of the king,” or “the royal *bat*” (Avigad; Inge; Naveh). Marine archaeology has discovered two Phoenician ships dating to this period, still laden with the standardized wine amphorae they were carrying to Egypt when they were sunk by a storm off the Philistine coast (Gore: 91-93).

² Readers unfamiliar with the political and military background presupposed can find a convenient summary with references in Miller and Hayes: 327-421; note, too, Parpola.

Imports of luxury goods, military matériel, and the wherewithal of monumental architecture benefited the elite few, who constituted less than two percent of the total population. The foodstuffs and fiber exported to pay for these imports were produced by the peasant majority and competed directly with its subsistence.³ Peasant producers could not consume what was exported; what they consumed, conversely, could not be exported. The supply of exportable commodities was finite and varied with erratic growing conditions, but the elite's appetite for luxury, military, and monumental imports was virtually limitless.

A simple cost/benefit analysis shows that the ruling elite bore few of the costs of the import/export trade, but enjoyed most of its benefits. The peasant majority, by contrast, bore most of the costs, but reaped few of the benefits (see the discussion below). As the situation developed, the ruling elite had a powerful economic incentive to increase production of the three preferred export crops. Olive oil and wine were particularly prized, since they were worth more per unit of weight or volume. The import/export trade of Israel and Judah in the eighth century BCE, therefore, widened the already gaping economic chasm between the wealthy urban elite and most peasants and artisans. It also pauperized portions of those already poor.

Regional Specialization of Agriculture and Herding

One way to increase production of the three preferred exports was through a regional specialization of agriculture under more centralized direction of the priorities and techniques of agricultural production. When the Hebrew text of 2 Chronicles 26:10 is read in congruence with current knowledge both of Hebrew syntax and of economic geography, it yields the following witness to such a process:

He [Uzziah] built guard towers in the Steppe and hewed out many cisterns,
for he had large herds; and in the Shephelah and in the Plain (he had)
plowmen; and (he had) vineyard and orchard workers in the Hills and in the
Carmel . . .

This verse suggests that herding was increased in the Negev under royal tutelage (see Rainey: 58; Chaney 1983: 73-74; Hopkins 1983: 200; Klein: 374). In this area, where normal rainfall was too sparse to permit much rain agriculture, the herding of sheep and goats exploited the seasonal grasses that sprang up during the winter rainy season. Guard towers that projected royal authority and offered protection from the raiding characteristic of pastoral activities now secured that herding (Faust: 180-89). Cisterns, hewed out at the direction of the crown, maximized the capacity of seasonal watering holes. Plowing – shorthand for the cultivation of cereal crops – was redoubled in the plain and piedmont regions best suited to grain agriculture. Perennial tree and vine crops, especially grapevines and olive orchards, were intensified in the uplands where they grew best. In each case, the economic exploitation of a given region was specialized to one or two crops by whose production that region could contribute maximally to the export trade and to the conspicuous consumption of the urban elites.

³ Patterns of social stratification in agrarian societies are remarkably uniform (see the convenient graphic summary in Lenski 1966; 1984: 284-85; Nolan and Lenski: 170-71).

This one verse in the Chronicler is by no means the only evidence for the processes described. Archaeology adds multiple facets to the picture. Rock-cut oil- and grape-processing installations are almost as old as agriculture itself in Palestine. Archaeological surveys, however, suggest a proliferation of and innovations in such installations in the hill country in the eighth century BCE (Dar: 147-90; Eitam; Walsh: 142-62). The *lmk* seal impressions on stores that Hezekiah probably gathered in preparation for his defense against Sennacherib witness a system of royal vineyards in the hill country of Judah in the late eighth century BCE (Kessler 1992: 144-48; Rainey: 57-61). Farther north and earlier in the same century, the Samaria ostraca document the flow of oil and wine to Israelite court officials from upland estates (Campbell 1991: 109-12; Kaufman; Premnath: 60-62, 81-83). These court records refer some dozen times to “washed oil,” a superior grade of olive oil extracted by water from crushed olives without the use of presses. Subsequent processing of the pulp and the use of presses introduced impurities into the oil and reduced its quality. Since only a small fraction of the total output of oil could be produced by this method of “washing,” Samaria’s ruling elite are shown to have had luxurious tastes; note their use of the “finest oils” in Amos 6:6 (Stager 1983: 241-45).

Archaeological surveys of total inhabited area, combined with comparatively normed coefficients of density, evidence a marked rise in the population of Israel and Judah during the Iron II period. While absolute growth occurred both in the lowlands and in the highlands, the hill country grew faster, for the first time in history accounting for more than half the total population of the region (Broshi and Finkelstein; Heer: 137). One need not solve the old chicken-and-egg problem in social-scientific theory to know that rapid population growth and agricultural intensification almost always go hand in hand in agrarian societies (Boserup; Grigg; Netting). In this case, the greater and more rapid growth occurred in the upland regions from which elite priorities demanded ever-increasing quantities of oil and wine.

Archaeology also shows that various marginal areas were inhabited in the eighth century, many for the first time. The badlands of western Samaria are a prime example. In most periods, they attracted more bandits than farmers. Such marginal areas tended to be cultivated only in periods of the greatest centralized control and intensification of agriculture. In this period, a number of settlements were built in these badlands, many on virgin sites. These latter were constructed according to the same or similar plans, occupied marginal niches in terms of water and resource availability, and included olive- and grape-processing installations (Dar: 147-90). At least one of the villages so witnessed also appears to be mentioned in the Samaria ostraca (assuming that Sefarin is the Sepher of the inscriptions; see Campbell 1991: 110-11; Dar: 139; Kaufman: 925). Taken in sum, these data corroborate for Israel a picture of regional specialization and intensification under royal initiative similar to that conveyed by the Chronicler for Judah.

Technological Innovations

This agricultural specialization and intensification fostered the proliferation of technological innovation in order to increase production. An example is the beam press used in olive oil production. While the first such press appears in the archaeological record of the ninth century BCE, its use burgeoned in the eighth century (Eitam; Stager and Wolff: 95-102).

In that context, it helped to wring every last drop of oil from the annual olive crop, and to do so more efficiently than had previous methods. Technological innovations not infrequently wait upon incentives from the political economy to have their greatest historical impact. In this case, the demand of the urban elites for ever more olive oil drove the expanded use of the beam press.

“Command” Economies

To a certain extent, at least, Israel and Judah developed in this period what economic historians call “command economies” (Chaney 1986: 74; 1989: 20-21; Heilbroner: 7-46; Hopkins 1983: 193; Nolan and Lenski: 154-55). Previously, the ruling elites had extracted as much “surplus” as possible from peasant production, but had left mostly to the peasants themselves decisions about what to grow and how to grow it. Now their desire for ever-increasing amounts of olive oil and wine led them to attenuate or even to usurp the decision-making functions of peasant households concerning the priorities and techniques of agricultural production.

Some recent archaeological priorities and techniques offer promise of more refined and documented analyses of the role of elites in economic decision-making. In older archaeological excavations, the bones and bone fragments from domesticated animals that had been butchered and eaten were not saved or examined when archaeologists unearthed them. They went straight to the excavation’s dump. Today, reputable excavations of any size have an archaeozoologist on staff, or at least available for extensive consultation. The analysis of faunal remains by these specialists has discovered a number of interesting correlations, some of which witness “. . . the degree of political centralization achieved by state and imperial regimes” (Wapnish and Hesse: 17).

Thus, at points of low integration, herds were configured to service households and contained relatively more goats and pigs. As agricultural systems intensified and market engagement or taxation/tributary demands increased, cattle and sheep became more important components of a husbandry system now more focused on export (Wapnish and Hesse: 17-18).

While it is far too early to speak definitively, early returns seem to indicate greater centralization of economic decision making in the southern Levant in the eighth century BCE.

Faunal remains from seventh-century Tell Jemmeh and Tell Miqne/Ekron, which have been conserved and analyzed carefully, point to the heavy intrusion of Assyrian imperial policy into local economies. “[Y]ounger animals up to three years of age were exported from the economy while the older stock was consumed at the site.” This pattern “. . . may reflect the export of live animals for tribute.” “. . . Assyrian policies dramatically increased the currency value of animals relative to their value as commodities and converted the pastoral sector to a ‘colonial’ economy” (Wapnish: 439). Evidence for this impact upon Levantine economies by Assyrian policies of tribute is less clear for the eighth century BCE, but similar results from other sites near grazing lands in the latter part of that century would scarcely surprise. Assyrian texts certainly witness Assyrian demands for animals as booty and tribute (Wapnish: 440). Skillfully managed, they transported themselves from tributary to master,

whereas the overland transportation of grain, given the technology available, was prohibitively expensive. This extraction of animals as tribute only intensified the demands upon hill country peasants who were being pushed to produce more and more olive oil and wine for the conspicuous consumption of urban elites and for the much cheaper seaborne trade with and through the Phoenicians.

Concentration of Risk and Effacement of Traditional Risk-Spreading Measures

We can now place in a broader context how the elites' pressure to grow ever-increasing amounts of the few preferred crops concentrated risk and effaced the risk-spreading devices of traditional peasant agriculture. Historically, the Israelite heartland had been in the hill country. There Israelite peasants worked small plots of arable land in mixed subsistence. Family holdings were modest, with a high congruence between those who held the land and those who actually worked it. Such peasant tenure of small plots is typical of upland regions in agrarian societies across a broad geographic and chronological spectrum. The hill-country peasants of Israel and Judah before the eighth century BCE produced most of what they consumed and consumed most of what they produced. That included grain, whose production in the uplands was "inefficient" but necessary to the independent subsistence of peasant villagers there (Marfoe: 21-23; Stager 1985: 24).

The situation in lowland Palestine had long been different, again in conformity with norms witnessed widely in agrarian societies. Landholdings in the lowlands were larger, on average, and concentrated in fewer hands. Most agricultural labor was done by tenant farmers, day laborers, peasants under *corvée* or debt obligations, or other workers whose access to land, livelihood, and personal freedom were insecure, attenuated, or under threat. In short, land holdings and the labor necessary to bring them to production were often separated in the lowlands. Much agricultural labor was landless and at the mercy of large landlords for any access to a livelihood. Eighth-century urban elites therefore found it relatively easy to work their will for agricultural intensification in the lowlands (Chaney 1989: 21-22).

But what of the hill country? Had much of it remained in small plots, tilled by their holders according to the priorities of mixed subsistence, that system would have constituted a major impediment to the goals of the city-based elites. They sought maximal *efficiency* and regional specialization in the production of olive oil and wine from the hill country. Left to their own devices, however, hill country peasants sought to guarantee the *sufficiency* of their livelihood by spreading the risks inherent in rain agriculture as widely as possible. That risk-spreading included the growing of grain in the uplands (Hopkins 1983: 187-88).

Even a sketch of their various risk-spreading mechanisms conveys something of the supple nuance of the methods and techniques involved. Fields that produced cereals in some years were not so used every year. To maintain fertility, they were periodically fallowed at some times and sown to legumes at others, at least in some rotations. As well as returning nitrogen to the soil, legumes also provided precious vegetable protein to the peasant diet (Borowski: 93-97). Fallowed fields supplemented uncultivable grazing land in providing pasture for the herding of sheep and goats. For subsistence farmers, such herding provided a hedge against the risk of purely agricultural pursuits. Animals so raised constituted a "disaster bank on the hoof" that stored surpluses from wet years to be drawn upon in dry

years. Flocks were allowed to expand in wet years, when there was ample grass and water in the seasonal pastures. When the next dry year came, and pasturage and water were insufficient for the expanded flocks, culling both brought the flocks and their pasturage back into equilibrium and provided much needed protein in an otherwise lean year (Hopkins 1983: 191).

The drying up of seasonal pastures and watering holes in the spring corresponded with the grain harvest. Much of the same labor necessary to move the flocks around the seasonal pastures during the rainy season now returned to the cereal fields to help with the all-important harvest. Once that grain harvest was secured, the flocks that had fed on the seasonal pastures in the wet season now grazed the stubble fields of the rainless summer, serving all the while as roving manure spreaders. Their bodily wastes, randomly distributed wherever they grazed, helped to replace the nutrients taken from the soil by the growing of grain. Herding nearer to the cereal-growing villages also made use of labor – the very young and the very old – that would not otherwise have been productive. In the process, the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the grandparents' generation was readily passed to the young children of the village (Chaney 1989: 22).

Tree and vine crops rounded out the repertoire of village agriculture in the hills. Grown here and there in small stands where soil and climate were particularly favorable to them but not to grains, these perennials complemented cereal agriculture and herding. They required pruning and other hand labor over the wet winter season, when cereals grew with relatively little attention. Their harvest took place in the fall, just before plowing and sowing of the grain fields. The combination of cereal farming, rotation with legumes, the herding of sheep and goats, and the raising of tree and vine crops exploited synergistically both differentiated and overlapping ecological niches, while distributing and balancing various demands on much the same pool of village labor throughout the year. Because their processed fruit could be stored stably for extended periods, grapes, olives and other perennials made valuable contributions to the goal of spreading risk (Eitam and Heltzer; Hopkins 1983: 189; Walsh).

The pressure from urban elites to produce ever-increasing quantities of olive oil and wine in the hills ran directly counter to the villagers' objective of spreading risk and optimizing labor through a diversity of subsistence means. This struggle between the values of *efficiency* and *sufficiency* was stark, if inadvertent. Sheep and goats maintained by households and their pastures, which were integral to village subsistence but not to the priorities of the urban elites, were probably the first element to be reduced. Meat for a few privileged urbanites was pastured in the steppe during the rainy season and then stall-fed in preparation for slaughter (cf. Amos 6:4). Stall-feeding also facilitated the collection and composting of wet manure that could be used to fertilize more intensively cropped perennials. Fallow and the grazing it had supported fell out of the mix (Chaney 1989: 23; Turkowski: 24). To the extent that livestock were raised for tribute, their herding constituted a specialized, pastoralist, economic activity, mostly in semi-arid regions, and no longer a part of village subsistence.

The intensified production of oil and wine in the hill country also shouldered aside the subsistence farming of grains there. Archaeology would seem to show that multi-purpose land, which had helped to spread risk, was gradually converted into terraces growing

vineyards and olive trees (Edelstein and Kislev; Faust: 166; Hopkins 1983: 200; note Isaiah 5:1-7; Chaney 1999). Elite practices and policies may have given impetus to the process. That, at least, is a possible implication of Amos 5:11 as now read by most commentators (see Chaney 1999: 108 and n. 2):

Therefore, because you impose grain tax upon the poor one,
and exactions of wheat you take from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted desirable vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

If these lines reflect a tax levied on grain grown “inefficiently” in the uplands, it would have added further incentive for the shift away from self-sufficiency among upland villagers. Even the intensified production of oil and wine in the hill country was somewhat at odds with elite demands on it. While demand tended to be steady or to increase, production itself was subject to the vicissitudes of the environment and, in the case of the olive, to a pattern of alternating yields.

Survival Loans and Their Implications

With risk-spreading diversification effaced and all “surpluses” extracted from hill country peasants even in good years, bad years spelled disaster. Peasant families faced a terrible calculus. They had too little grain to be able both to seed their fields and to sustain their lives until the next harvest in the spring. What they sowed, they could not eat; what they ate, they could not sow. Current hunger had to be measured against future starvation. This situation resulted in forced borrowing. The survival loans to which these peasants resorted out of stark necessity did not constitute “venture capital” in any sense, nor were the debt contracts entered into freely or without coercion (Chaney 1991: 128-29; Kessler 2008: 111-12; Lang 1983: 117).

These survival loans also violated the social and cultural norms of the village. In periods of less centralized control and “surplus” extraction, peasants within certain village and/or kinship groups routinely gave each other survival loans free of interest. This system of loans was no more altruistic than modern insurance policies on automobiles or houses. It was, rather, a risk-spreading mechanism, and insurance against catastrophic failure. Peasant households gave interest-free survival loans to neighboring families or kin who were experiencing a bad year in the sure knowledge that the vicissitudes of the environment would soon enough reverse the roles. Most agrarian societies, past and present, evidence some form of such loans (Chaney 1991: 129; Critchfield: 345). As the situation developed in eighth-century Israel and Judah, however, most peasants were not able to make such loans. The only “surpluses” available were in the hands of the wealthy landlords or their agents.

The terms of the typical debt contract only exacerbated the peasants’ plight. Most loans were made in silver bullion,⁴ whose value relative to grain was the least when grain was

⁴ Graeber says that bullion or coinage appears in transactions when patterns of communal trust break down. The transaction is thus depersonalized and reduced to a single, economic strand of relationship (49-51, 211-22).

scarcest. Relatively speaking, it took much silver to buy a little grain when grain was in short supply. The loans routinely came due at harvest, and were payable in kind at the very time when plentiful supply insured that grain was worth the least relative to silver. Simply granting the loan with silver as the medium of exchange and requiring that it be paid back in grain at harvest, therefore, imposed a crushing rate of interest in fact, if not in law (Chaney, in press).

Surety for loans was the peasants' land holding, if they had managed to retain rights to any, and/or the indentured labor of one or more family members. Given the cycles of debt created in the situation, foreclosure was frequently at the discretion of the creditor. Wealthy landlords could first squeeze every last drop from a peasant family's labor, and then foreclose, thereby creating a growing pool of landless day laborers and debt-slaves. Foreclosure on peasant land rights for non-payment of survival loans granted on impossible terms was also a mechanism of land consolidation. More and more land rights passed into fewer and fewer hands, as those few wealthy enough to grant survival loans foreclosed upon the desperate many who had no choice but to take them out. Land consolidation and an increase of landless day-laborers and debt-slaves walked hand in hand. The newly landless peasants often suffered still another indignity. They now labored part-time – at depressed wages and only at the landlord's good pleasure – on land to which their family had had secure rights for generations. Their loss of those rights meant not only severe economic insecurity, but a hiatus in cultural continuity and a diminution of social and legal status as well (Chaney 1989: 25-26; Lang 1983: 117).

Socioeconomic Segmentation and Absentee Landlords

These changes in the political economies of Israel and Judah, particularly in the hill country, separated and segmented what previously had been integrated into one more organic social whole in the village. Not only were agricultural labor and land rights separated, but various factors of production – arable land, pasture, water, traction animals, tools, seed, manure, etc. – were segmented and subjected to separate rent. There was also a growth in absentee landlordism. With their promise of imported luxuries and greater access to political influence and social prestige, the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem drew landlords away from their country estates and their need for clientele support. Exchanges between landlords and peasants had never been a relationship of equals. When landlords lived on their country estates, however, they and their peasants attended many of the same ceremonial events. Their social relations were “multi-stranded,” developed in a number of facets of life (Chaney 1989: 24-25; Lang 1983: 119).

Removal of the landlords to the capital cities, where their advancement depended in no small part on their successful participation in the games of conspicuous consumption played at court, reduced their relationship to their peasants to a single strand of economic exploitation. What they wanted and needed from their lands and peasants was an ever-increasing flow of oil and wine. They cared less and less about the methods used to secure their bounty. That was the concern of the stewards they left in charge back in the country. The stewards, meantime, knew perfectly well that their own success depended on the metrics of the estate's output, not on the ethics of how they treated the agricultural labor that worked it.

Court Proceedings

The foreclosures that played a crucial part in the dynamics of change described to this point came to court to be ratified. At the local level, “court” involved a largely consensus process in a meeting of the free males of the village at dawn before they dispersed to their fields for the workday. This “justice in the gate” had few procedural safeguards. As long as there were no overweening imbalances of power among its constituents, however, it could produce more than a modicum of justice. The changes already described, of course, produced an ever-greater differential in power. Landlords wealthy enough to provide survival loans could easily coerce or suborn the village court’s decisions. Appeal was futile, since the king was literally the court of last resort (Chaney 1999: 111-12; 2004b; Köhler: 127-50; Whitelam).

One of the literary forms most common in the oldest material in the eighth-century prophets directly addressed this dilemma of the village courts. Rhetorically speaking, these prophetic oracles appealed the coerced and suborned decisions of the village courts, not to the king’s court, but to the court of the King of kings. The authority the prophets claimed was not to speak in their own right, but to report the proceedings that they had overheard in God’s law court in the sky. As auditors on God’s processing and disposition of the case on appeal, they regularly declared a reversal of what happened in human courts, where the wealthy and powerful were found in the right and the powerless poor were adjudged guilty. According to the prophets, God had declared the poor debtors innocent, and the powerful and rapacious landlords guilty. God’s justice in these prophetic oracles was frequently poetic. The sentence pronounced corresponded to the indictment charged in a measure-for-measure fashion, thereby making the punishment fit the crime. In God’s court, as the prophets reported it, the wealthy and powerful got to taste more than a bit of their own medicine (Blenkinsopp: 29-30; Ramsey).

Changing Gender Roles with Increased Male Dominance

If one is to judge from widespread comparative work, there was also a significant change in gender roles in eighth-century Israel and Judah. Whether past or present, virtually all agrarian societies are patriarchal. Perhaps the most nuanced explanation that current social-scientific theory has to offer for this male dominance is that childbearing and the nursing and care of small children are incompatible with the circumstances and activities that surround plowing. Only women can bear and nurse children. Small children require frequent care and are not easily taken far from the safety of home in the village. Thus, the economic activities most compatible with the nursing and care of small children are those that can be performed in or close to home and that can tolerate frequent interruptions. Such activities include the processing, storage and preparation of foodstuffs and fiber, and the tending of “kitchen gardens” kept very near the houses in the village.

Plowing is the antithesis of such activities. It often takes place at significant distances from the village and involves large animals and plows whose movements are intrinsically dangerous to small children should they chance to get in the way. Given the relative cost of traction animals, they need to be used efficiently. Any significant interruption in their activities, therefore, is costly and counterproductive. Under such circumstances, a division of

labor that locates female economic activities primarily in the “domestic domain,” while assigning plowing and other field work mostly to males is efficient and rational. (During points of crisis in the agricultural year, such as harvest, when all available labor is needed in the fields, women work there as well, of course.) Coincident with this division of labor comes a dominance of males in the so-called “public domain,” that part of society and culture that takes place outside the home. Gender roles, therefore, increasingly assign women to the domestic domain, men to the public domain (Bossen; Nolan and Lenski: 167-68).

On a broadly comparative basis, social scientists can say that agricultural intensification usually exacerbates male dominance in agrarian societies. Predictably, as the percentage of field labor performed by females in intensified agriculture drops from the levels characteristic of subsistence agriculture, so, too, does the status of women. Women’s activities – while no less arduous! – are increasingly restricted to the domestic domain (Bossen 1989; Meyers: 189-96). Meantime, as previously discussed, more and more of the decision making regarding what to produce and how to produce it is removed to the public domain, where men have long dominated. Thus, it seems probable that an increase of male dominance was a concomitant of agricultural intensification in eighth-century Israel and Judah.⁵ If so, some desperate peasant men, having watched their livelihoods, honor, and status debased and abused, would almost certainly have vented their anger and shame on their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Elite males, doubly empowered by class and by gender, would have felt even fewer constraints in their treatment of lower class women.

These changes in gender roles are powerfully reflected in the book of Hosea, as it is read by a number of current scholars (Bird: 219-36; Chaney 2004a; Keefe). Their interdisciplinary scholarship sees much of the rhetoric of Hosea as addressed specifically to elite males in such a way as to mock sarcastically their privileges and pretensions. The very term *ba’al*, which figures so prominently in Hosea, participates intrinsically in hierarchies both of class and of gender. It is a title meaning “lord,” both as the landlord is “lord” of his peasants, and as the husband is “lord” of his wife.

Some Implications for Considering Poverty Today

Many passages in the eighth-century prophets reflect and reflect upon the dynamics sketched above. Their explication must be left for other occasions. I conclude instead with a few brief remarks about contemporary implications (for much fuller and wider-ranging discussions, see Coomber; Davis). My remarks are brief for two reasons. First, when it comes to the complex ethical questions of modern economic systems and their dynamics, most readers of this essay are as expert as I – many far more so. I have neither standing nor wish to pontificate. As members of our own religious communities, we share the responsibility to grapple with contemporary questions of economic justice. Second, when we do our descriptive and analytical work on ancient texts and their contexts carefully enough, many of their implications are only too clear, sometimes uncomfortably so.

⁵ MacDonald states that the relative height of male and female skeletal remains in Iron Age Israel and Judah suggests that women, on average, were less well-nourished than men as a result of “. . . unfavorable social conditions discriminating against women . . .” (87).

With those caveats, nevertheless, please allow me just a few concluding generalizations. Many texts from the eighth-century prophets – when read against the background here made more explicit – suggest to me that we must carefully examine the intermediate and long-term results of systemic economic changes. We must ask not only who benefits from such changes, but at whose expense? Do those injured suffer only temporary and partial loss, or are their losses permanent and irremediable? Does the new regime create compensating economic opportunities for those injured, or do the changes condemn them to being a permanent underclass, marginalized or even pauperized? Is the distance between the top and the bottom of the social pyramid increased or decreased? If the old economic order was reasonably well integrated and balanced, spreading risk and allowing various threats to be met nimbly and stably over long periods, how does the new order compare on these issues? Does it concentrate risk? Does that concentration increase the possibility of catastrophic failure? Does it concentrate economic decision making? If so, what knowledge about and experience of economic processes is denied those who make decisions that impact everyone? What are the likely results of a disconnect between such knowledge and such decision making? Are economic rewards received commensurate with economic risks taken, or do power dynamics dictate some other allocation? What were the environmental costs of the old system? What are they in the new system? What is the sustainability of each?

When we juxtapose the world behind eighth-century prophetic texts with that currently in front of them, these and many similar questions about economic justice arise. How are we to “read” the “dynamic analogies?” I do not mean to suggest that conscientious adherents to “biblical faith” will, by good will and intelligence, come easily to clear or consensus answers. My experience suggests quite the contrary. But the presence of these texts in our Bibles suggests to me that sustained, in-depth, civil and mutually respectful engagement of these questions in our communities of faith is incumbent upon us individually and corporately. We must, I believe, come to such questions not full of predetermined and self-serving “answers,” but expectant of new perspectives, new insights, and new discoveries about others and ourselves. In that elusive pursuit of economic justice, the eighth-century prophets – read against the world they presume – can function powerfully as our mentors, not by providing us pat answers, but by pressing us for more probing, pertinent questions.

Appendix: Brief Summary and Critique of Recent Works

Recently published works by three scholars – Philippe Guillaume, Avraham Faust, and Walter J. Houston – challenge, in whole or in part, the social description and analysis of eighth-century Israel and Judah that is presented in the essay above. Their challenge should not go unanswered, and so in the following pages I shall offer a preliminary critique of their works, primarily in regard to how their works challenge my own.

Philippe Guillaume

Guillaume’s polemical and far-ranging book defies easy summary, but the following points are among his major emphases. 1) There are insuperable difficulties in dating the texts of the Hebrew Bible, including, most specifically, the “eighth-century” prophets. These texts can be related historically only to Persian Yehud, at the earliest, and to no earlier period. 2) Notions of “oppressed peasants” in Iron Age II Israel and Judah are “the myth of the

helpless peasant,” mere Marxist projections and figments of the romantic imaginations of liberal “Hebrew exegetes.” Had the peasants of ancient Israel been all that oppressed, they would have revolted, but there is no evidence for such revolts. 3) The biblical prophets were not champions of social justice. Instead, the “fulminations” – a favorite word – and “virulent denunciations of the rich” (163) attributed to them “should be read as evidence of the power struggle between different elite groups rather than as clues of the actual economic situation on the ground” (248). 4) Attempts to understand the economic workings of ancient Israel should be focused, not on the prophetic literature, which is tendentious, but elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Guillaume offers numerous “rereadings” of those non-prophetic texts to prove his other points. 5) There was no struggle over land in ancient Israel, but rather an over-abundance of arable land combined with a chronic lack of labor and agricultural credit. 6) Loans were extended only to “credit-worthy” peasants and were rarely oppressive. They were “an essential ingredient to a healthy economy” (192), serving to smooth out fluctuations in the allocation of available resources and labor. The primary creditors were “merchant-lenders” who operated in an active, developed grain market. 7) Notions of private ownership are useless in the analysis of ancient economies. It is better to speak of land allocation or possession and to find analogies for biblical practices in the land categories of the Ottoman Empire.

My critique of Guillaume’s assertions proceeds in the same order as the summary above. 1) The literature referred to at the beginning of this essay (the works cited in Chaney 2006: 145-46) is but the tip of the iceberg of a vast literature discussing the dating of various levels of composition and recomposition in the books of the “eighth-century” prophets, books that are widely viewed as literarily composite. The criteria for dating in much of that body of scholarship are specific and testable. They go far in clarifying the differing contexts that can account for the multiple perspectives and voices found in the same prophetic book. Guillaume may agree with critics of those analyses, but he owes his readers more than perfunctory citation of their criticisms (44). Many serious students of the prophets still find that critique, which claims that nothing in the prophets can be related to anything historical before the Persian period, to be overly broad and lacking in specific engagement with previous scholarship. The constant repetition of dicta that “everybody knows” does not constitute an advance in scholarship.

2) Guillaume either ignores or is innocent of most of the social-scientific literature on peasant-landlord relations. Those exchanges almost always involve some element of exploitation. Not infrequently, the exploitation is extreme. Although Guillaume cites the work of Scott in support of his picture of the “empowered peasant” (63), Scott’s larger body of work only makes clear the disadvantaged position of most peasants in most times and places. His exploration of *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* shows that peasants use covert means of resisting landlord exactions precisely because they are poor and not powerful enough to press their own interests more directly and openly. Guillaume acknowledges that Lenski’s concept of “agrarian societies” (Lenski 1966; 1984: 189-296) “. . . seems broad enough to encompass the reality reflected in biblical texts. . . ,” but objects that “. . . its very broadness reduces its heuristic value. . . ” (152). But Lenski’s work demonstrates on a broadly comparative basis that agrarian societies, for all their variation in some respects, are remarkably consistent in patterns of social stratification that privilege an elite few – less

than two percent of the population – and condemn a majority of the rest, predominantly peasants, to one or another level of poverty. Lenski’s comparative work in historical sociology cannot by itself demonstrate anything specific about the status of peasants in ancient Israel’s political economy. What it can and does demonstrate, however, is that the picture of peasant-landlord relations sketched in the present essay is consistent with what Lenski regularly finds to be true in agrarian societies as a generic type, whereas Guillaume’s picture of ancient Israel is a glaring anomaly in a generic category defined by specific and testable criteria. I prefer the former odds to the latter. Guillaume protests on several occasions that if the peasants of ancient Israel had had that hard a life, they would have revolted, but they did not. This argument misses the point that successful peasant revolts – the kind that would leave historical evidence – are extremely rare in agrarian history. Those few that have made a mark on history share a number of conditions conducive to their success (Chaney 1983: 61-67; Landsberger: 1-64; Wolf 1966, 1969). Few of those conditions were present in eighth-century Israel and Judah, leaving the lack of peasant rebellions scant evidence indeed for peasant wellbeing.

3) While Guillaume asserts repeatedly that the “fulminations” of the prophets are nothing more than the attack of one elite group upon another, he nowhere adduces a concrete context that would account plausibly for the content of the actual texts. He seems viscerally offended by charges that the rich and powerful are oppressing poor and lowly peasants, leaving his readers to ponder what has occasioned his own fierce heat. The nuanced account of the composition of the books of the “eighth-century” prophets preferred here, by contrast, posits plausible contexts and rhetorical vectors for each of the several perspectives contained in these prophetic books. It explains how and why a sharp critique of the ruling classes ends up in what are, in their final form, quite clearly elite documents.

4) In his quest for the economic relations reflected in the Hebrew Bible, Guillaume focuses upon fresh interpretations of a number of non-prophetic texts. Space does not permit discussion of his many “rereadings,” but they frequently fail to inspire confidence. Most of these texts, too, are “tendentious,” but the rhetorical vector of a text being “reread” is rarely clarified, and standard methodologies of philology and textual criticism are sometimes flouted. On more than one occasion, it is difficult to escape the feeling that the text is being rewritten to fit a paradigm more asserted by repetition than demonstrated.

5) Guillaume’s claim of an over-abundance of arable land in ancient Israel can only be maintained by highly questionable generalizations and parallels. He takes the depopulated state of Persian Yehud as the demographic norm, whereas, in fact, it is the demographic anomaly, standing in marked contrast to all of Iron Age II in the southern Levant. Appeals to the availability of land in Mesopotamia ignore differences in natural environment and agricultural technology. In regard to arable land and the actual demographic situation in Iron Age II, Noll states “. . . [T]he Cisjordan Highlands approached a point of full exploitation. That is to say, given ancient farming techniques, the Cisjordan Highlands achieved a population size that was taking advantage of all arable regions” (262; cf. Faust: 260). Only Guillaume’s chronological removal of the composition of all biblical texts to Persian Yehud can justify his “myth of an over-abundance of arable land.”

6) Guillaume's treatment of credit consistently fails to make the distinction between what Boer calls "credit" and what he terms "debt" (2012; cf. Boer 2007). The former relies upon trust, not as a moral value, but ". . . in terms of allocation, in which credit functions as one of the means for ensuring the mutual allocation and reallocation of all goods within the community. By contrast, debt operates mainly as an extractive economic device. That is, it extracts something – goods, labor, money, [I would add land] – from the debtor with the result that [the] lender's own wealth increases" (Boer 2012: 2-3). Such debt ensures "that the flow of wealth runs from debtor to lender"; it "functions as a means of compulsion for labor;" and it "functions to ensure economic hierarchy" (Boer 2012: 3-4). Guillaume treats all debt in ancient Israel as "credit," ignoring virtually all comparative (and biblical) evidence for the exploitive nature of "debt." His positing of an active international grain market and a large number of "merchant-lenders" in ancient Israel's economy flies in the face of the costs of overland transportation in the preindustrial world (Lenski 1966, 1982: 204-206). In the agricultural debt practices of Israel and Judah in Iron Age II, the primary lenders were landlords, not grain merchants (cf. Kessler 1989).

7) Guillaume's cautions against reading modern notions of land "ownership" into biblical texts are well taken. Concepts of "allocation" or "possession" are indeed more appropriate. The review of Ottoman land categories and the suggestion of possible parallels in ancient Israel are suggestive and helpful. Some of Guillaume's applications probably press possible analogies too hard, however, even though he urges others not to do so. Notions and practices of land tenure in ancient Israel likely did not conform completely to any clear schematic that moderns can enunciate. Both concept and practice likely varied through time and place. Practice adhered sometimes more, sometimes less to theory. Multiple levels of claim upon the same plot of arable land and its produce were often the norm. Modern discussions should seek to avoid both anachronism and a level of precision that the sources do not allow. Whatever the concepts or practices of land tenure that obtained, however, the major differentials of power in society and the fact that access to land was, for much the greater part, access to the economic base virtually ensured that landlords would pressure peasants concerning the finite and all-important resource of arable land and the peasant labor necessary to bring it into production.

Avraham Faust and Walter J. Houston

The challenges that Faust and Houston pose to the picture offered in this essay are far less frontal than those laid down by Guillaume. For a time Houston (2004, 2006) was in basic agreement, with relatively minor nuances here and there, but then he began to encounter the work of Faust. That encounter prompted Houston to revise his previous work (2006) in a relatively major way (2008), and then to summarize his new position on the matters under discussion here (2010).

Faust's labors to collect and interpret archaeological data have been both encyclopedic and herculean. Happily, his findings, the publication of which had been spread broadly, are now brought to a focus in a single volume. While no summary can possibly do justice to his far-ranging work, his conclusions that bear upon the current discussion can be stated with surprising concision. Faust addresses the issue of social stratification in Iron II Israel and Judah by means of what he believes to be the only reliable archaeological indicator of relative

wealth – house size and, secondarily, house quality. Using these rather narrowly focused criteria, Faust finds strong evidence for stark social stratification in the cities of Iron II Israel and Judah. In the villages and farmsteads, however, he finds a lack of significant social stratification and evidence for a peasant economy that was healthy and more than sufficient. “Thus, the processes of urbanization and specialization gradually caused major stratification [in the cities]” (264). “But this process was not pervasive: according to the archaeological record, this process did not apply in the rural sector. . . .” (265).

Houston chides Faust for treating “. . . urban and rural society quite separately, virtually as independent worlds which had little or nothing to do with each other” (2010: 106). “None of Faust’s evidence challenges the view that the villages, as well as the lower classes of the cities, were subject to the official class, and that the balance of redistribution did not favor them” (2010: 106). Houston insists, however, “. . . that the consequent inequality is more pronounced within the cities than between the cities and the villages, and evidence for it is more obtrusive in the cities” (2010: 106). He examines numerous prophetic texts in light of that hypothesis and concludes

. . . that prophetic accusations of social injustice have a background primarily in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem, and that both oppressors and victims mostly resided in those places, or nearby. These prophetic texts offer a moral evaluation, of course from a committed and some would say prejudiced viewpoint, of a process of rapid social change in the fortified cities of monarchical Israel and Judah. They cannot be used to challenge archaeological evidence that this process, during the monarchical era, touched rural areas only to a limited extent, except in the immediate hinterland of the capitals (2010: 113-14).

A number of factors cast doubt upon some of the conclusions of Faust and Houston and the certainty with which they are articulated. 1) As Faust admits repeatedly (129, 206, 234, 272, etc.), “. . . archaeological knowledge of rural settlement is very limited” (234). The severely limited archeological sample of villages contains very few larger villages – where greater evidence of social stratification might be expected – and may well not be particularly representative in other ways as well. The vast majority of the archaeological “evidence” is from “cities,” but comparative sociology and anthropology indicate that the vast majority of the population would have been rural. Thus, archaeology in its current state can scarcely claim to trump all other evidence for the political economy of the peasantry in Iron II Israel and Judah.

2) Faust uses house size – and secondarily a somewhat subjective assessment of house quality – as the primary indicator of relative wealth. This one criterion is virtually the sole basis of his conclusion that the rural sector of Iron II Israel and Judah lacked significant social stratification. As Holladay observes on the basis of ethnographic analogy, however, “. . . wealth distinctions (other than in storage capacity) may only poorly be reflected in domestic architecture” (377). Houston concedes that “[s]ome social differences could be hidden within houses built in happier days” (2010: 105). Even Faust’s treatment of the database for his sole archaeological indicator of relative wealth sometimes raises questions about his even-handedness. He “corrects” the principal excavator or site expert on several

occasions, always to play down or explain away what those he corrects took as evidence for social stratification – thus, Campbell on Shechem (Faust: 63), Zorn on Mizpah (72-77), Dar on what he takes to be the house of a village leader or chief at Khirbet Jemein (136 and 169, n. 23), and Eitam on Beit Aryeh (137-38). On more than one occasion, Faust is forced to admit that the data he is reporting and analyzing point to greater social stratification – particularly in one of the very few large villages from which we currently have data – than his general conclusions would lead one to believe (141, 169-70, 175, 195). Faust is dismissive of serious attempts to find evidence of social stratification in small finds (41, 120-24). He may be correct about some or even many of the particulars that he disputes with other archaeological experts. All his “corrections” and disagreements, however, point uniformly toward the conclusion that there was no significant social stratification in the villages of Iron II Israel and Judah, leaving Faust’s readers to wonder if some portion of that conclusion was foregone, and some portion of his arguments special pleading.

3) If a broader spectrum of archaeological evidence is examined, it reveals that urban elites had greater impact upon the political economy of the countryside than Faust and Houston wish to acknowledge. Faust himself describes and analyzes a series of “strongholds” and “fortresses” that represent a major projection of elite power into the hinterland (189, 192-93). Major taxes, corvée and “extensive personnel and employment stratification” (193) are among the concomitants he admits. In his work in western Samaria, Dar finds roads that he dates to the Iron II period and interprets as built to move agricultural produce to market (137, 145). Faust readily admits that “[p]arts of western Samaria are an ecological fringe region that was not intensively settled in later periods. . .” (176). It was, in fact, inhabited only when elite initiatives and population pressure pressed its marginal environment into agricultural production. Dar reports that many of the buildings in this area that date to the Iron II period, especially oil- and wine-processing installations, seem to have been built to quite similar plans, indicating a dimension of central planning.

A number of isolated “farmsteads,” as opposed to villages, have been excavated from the period, mostly around Jerusalem and in western Samaria. Emphasizing those in the Jerusalem area, Houston quotes Hopkins (1997: 307) that farmsteads reflect “. . . the penetration of the countryside by the managerial arm of the city-based administration” (2010: 112). When one includes the farmsteads of western Samaria in the mix, this phenomenon tells against the dictum of Faust and Houston that the economic penetration of urban elites into the countryside was minimal. In this regard, Hopkins’ further comments, tutored as they are by a deep knowledge of the social sciences, are worth quoting:

Surface dating has demonstrated the association of farmsteads with periods of high-density land use, a barometer of the growth of the urban sphere and its sway over the surrounding territory. Thus, the appearance of farmsteads is related to heightened security conditions and the burgeoning demand for specialized economic goods – that is, marketable commodities (Hopkins 1997: 306).

Farmsteads thus witness growing economic influence of urban elites both in the immediate environs of the capital city (Jerusalem) *and* in marginal lands some distance from the capital (Samaria). The latter were pressed into production only during periods of “high-density land

use,” when urban elites exercised maximal influence over the political economy of the rural hinterland.

4) Faust and Houston paint a picture of happy self-sufficiency for the rural peasantry of Iron II Israel and Judah based primarily on the domestic architecture of a few small villages. Their account finds the countryside touched but lightly by the stark social stratification and privation of the lower classes that characterized the cities. Using sophisticated interdisciplinary methods, broadly based in the sciences and social sciences, MacDonald renders a far less rosy account. After nuanced surveys of “Environment and Climate” (50-56), “Food Shortage and Famine” (57-60), “The Consumption of Meat: Archaeological Evidence” (61-72), “The Consumption of Meat: Anthropological Evidence” (73-76), “Food Distribution” (77-79), and “Nutritional Deficiencies,” which examines the evidence of human skeletal remains, he concludes:

. . . currently the evidence suggests that the population of ancient Israel did not enjoy good health. These demographic patterns are consistent with those from many other premodern agricultural communities. They suggest that most people had a short life, with a high level of infant mortality and few adults surviving beyond the age of fifty. This cannot be attributed to nutrition alone, but there are good grounds for thinking that poor nutrition played a contributory role (86-87).

Life expectancy in the southern Levant appears to have been markedly lower in the Iron Age than in the preceding Bronze Age or the Hellenistic and Roman periods that followed (MacDonald: 86). MacDonald’s final words of conclusion are: “Our current state of knowledge suggests that the population of Iron Age Israel generally suffered from an inadequate diet, poor health, and low life expectancy. Their experience was little different from that of other premodern inhabitants of Palestine, and in some respects it may even have been worse” (87). MacDonald’s conclusions are drawn after a judicious and methodological rigorous sifting of broad bodies of evidence, and deserve full credence unless and until the state of knowledge about such matters changes markedly.

5) Houston maintains “. . . that the biblical text assumes that the characteristic relationship between rich and poor is that of patronage. . . ,” and “. . . that the most pervasive mechanism through which the poor were exploited was the abuse of this relationship” (2010: 102; see also 2006: 42-46). Since patronage involves a face-to-face relationship, Houston then asks, “How then can this mechanism be invoked to explain the exploitation of people in villages by people in cities, who would rarely meet?” (102). Houston finds his answer in the work of Faust – stratification exists only in the cities, so the poor of the prophetic critique are the urban poor, and not the peasantry of the countryside, who are the vast majority of the population. He then undertakes a survey of prophetic passages condemning the exploitation of the poor by the rich and argues that they all presume a locus in or near the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem.

While patron-client relations were undoubtedly important in ancient Israel, and work well to explain many phenomena alluded to in texts such as the narratives about Elijah and Elisha, Houston’s reduction of all relationships between rich and poor to the patron-client paradigm is overly broad. The paradigm will not bear the weight he places upon it. Some

landlord-peasant relationships fit the patron-client model, but surely not all. As for Houston's contention that prophetic oracles castigating the rich for oppressing the poor all presume a locus in or near the capital cities of Jerusalem and Samaria, the conclusion once again far exceeds the evidence and not infrequently involves special pleading to make it fit. A couple of examples must suffice. Despite Faust's special pleading (63), Campbell makes a very credible case for "rich oppressors" beyond Jerusalem and Samaria: "To me it seems probable that the domestic housing evidence from Shechem as well as Tirzah, Hazor, and other such sites points to the reality a prophet like Amos faced. It was not just the significantly wealthy at the court at Samaria but also people who lived only relatively better than their neighbors who may have been tempted to take advantage of others, to cheat them in trading, to live too comfortably for the well-being of the community" (1994: 49-50).

Houston turns to Micah 2:1-5 and expresses the common judgment: "Here surely we have the oppression of the peasantry by the rich in order to enlarge landholdings. . ." (2010: 111). But then Houston rejects the commonly held view of commentators that Micah had events in and near his hometown of Moresheth-Gath in view. "We do not know whether Moresheth-Gath was a village or a city at this time. In fact, we do not even know where it was precisely, so there is little light available to shed on our question in this direction" (2010: 111). He then argues that because Isaiah contains a similar passage (Isaiah. 5:8-10), and Isaiah is linked to Jerusalem, ". . . both the Isaiah and Micah texts, which are closely parallel, are set in Jerusalem" (2010: 112).

Most learned opinion places Moresheth-Gath at Tell ej-Judeideh, a 2.5 hectare site in the Shephelah, on the basis of Eusebius, Jerome, and the Medeba map (Broshi; Roncace). If that is correct, Moresheth was a large village or a small town. In any case, Moresheth-Gath was in the Shephelah, associated as it is with other towns and villages there in the punning lament in Micah 1:8-16. Lachish, which bears the brunt of blame in that lament (vs. 13), was the large provincial "capital" of the Shephelah. It dominated the surrounding towns and villages and their burgeoning agricultural production in Iron II, and evidences stark social stratification (Faust: 78-82). Since the lament in Micah 1:8-16 immediately precedes the passage in Micah 2:1-5, Houston's restriction of the passage to Jerusalem alone seems wishful thinking, as does his restriction of the poor in prophetic oracles to the urban lower classes. Landlord-peasant relations defined the major axis of exploitation in eighth-century Israel and Judah. Some exploited peasants lived in cities, but the vast majority lived in villages. Many landlords had roots in the countryside, but moved to the cities, particularly the capital cities, to avail themselves there of imported luxuries and greater access to political influence and social prestige.

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