Fleets of Tarshish: Trading Ventures and Other Tall Tales of the Bible

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ABSTRACT: This article reconsiders the issue of exchange (or trade as it is often called) in ancient Southwest Asia. It does so by tackling the widespread assumption, based on neoclassical economics, that there was an “international market economy” based on long distance trade. I challenge that assumption both by analysing the metaphorical image of exchange in biblical texts concerning Solomon and by drawing upon archaeological evidence and theoretical considerations. By doing so, it is possible to reassess and redefine three key economic features of the ancient world: surplus, exchange, and market. Surpluses were produced by farmers for difficult times ahead, long-distance exchange was primarily in preciocities, and markets were generated out of logistical concerns with provisioning armies and not primarily for profit (as is the case with most markets throughout history). I also find that the merchant was a very despised figure in the ancient world, for he was at the same time diplomat, tax collector, usurer and landlord. In light of this evidence, the article closes by asking why neoclassical models have become so popular in the last 25 years.

Key words: economics, ancient Southwest Asia, exchange, trade, surplus, markets, Solomon, merchants

For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks (1 Kgs 10,22).

My topic is trade, or rather exchange.¹ In particular, I am interested in a contrast, between a widely proposed “international market economy” based on long distance trade in ancient Southwest Asia and what may be called the

¹ I follow Milevski in preferring the terminology of exchange to trade (Milevski 2011: 7-8).
image of exchange in biblical texts concerning Solomon. This contradiction enables some rethinking concerning the question of exchange, not only in terms of the way we should understand key terms such as surplus, trade and market, but also in the way merchants are represented in texts from the time. The following analysis begins by outlining what is arguably the majority position in regard to exchange in ancient Southwest Asia, which I then juxtapose with the key biblical texts concerning the merchant king and their grovelling busybodies, who rolled the tasks of merchant, diplomat, tax collector, usurer and landlord into one. I close by asking why these recent reconstructions have been made concerning ancient economies.

Trading Ventures

You increased your busybodies
more than the stars of the heavens.
The locust sheds its skin and flies away (Nah 3,16).

It has become a commonplace among many scholars of ancient Southwest Asia and the southern Levant that the prime economic motor was trade for profit. This position may initially have been restricted to changes that took place in the first millennium, but one now finds it advocated across the millennia, from Uruk to Persia. In a swathe of literature, a triad of terms appears to characterize this ancient economy: trade, markets, and surplus. Given the primacy of agricultural production, the farmers in question specialized in certain areas—sheep for wool and meat, cattle for milk and meat, grains, olive oil, wine, and so on. Having built up surpluses, and having been good students of Adam Smith, they naturally sought to sell their surpluses for profit; hence trade, both locally and over longer, or “international” distances. These two practices—production for surpluses and trade—thereby give us a market economy. It may have been a little more primitive, smaller in scale—“partly capitalist” (Algaze 2008: 42)—or it may have been as complex and as sophisticated as capitalism itself (Cline 2009: 107).

These farmers and merchants were driven by the same motives that drive us to improve our lot in life: self-interest (Adam Smith) and comparative advantage (David Ricardo). At heart, human beings are largely the same, that is, somewhat selfish.

Within this framework, all manner of dimensions of this ancient market economy have been identified. Pastoral nomads would specialize in hides, meat, and dairy products, trading them for the products typical of settled farmers, such as grains, vegetables, legumes, and dates (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 117; Finkelstein and Mazar 2007; Thompson 1999: 136). Farmers from the hill country would produce olive oil and wine, selling them to pastoral nomads, the cities, or even the Assyrians, leading to economic production enabled trade for pre-

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2. The trap of arguing that the “primitives” were not primitive at all, but that they were as sophisticated as us, is that it assumes that we—under capitalism—set the benchmark for sophistication and complexity.
cious metals across the Mediterranean (Levy 1992: 75; Mazar 1992: 118; Gitin 1997; Finkelstein and Mazar 2007: 16; Coomber 2011: 220-222). From the valleys would come barley and other grains that were then traded with the Phoenician cities, which would in return sell the wares they had acquired from many quarters (Woolley 1946: 180; Finkelstein and Mazar 2007: 96, 137; Stager and Master 2011). Other farmers would specialize in sheep, selling wool, wool products and sheep on the market, especially to the cities (Fall, Falconer, and Lines 1998: 2002; Zeder 1991). One part of the flock would be kept for the farmer’s own use, but the surplus was designed for export, marketed for its exchange value (Hesse 1999: 107). In more entrepreneurial villages, flocks would be kept so that they could become the currency of exchange after a bumper crop (Holladay 1995: 386). Despite the telling absence of evidence of trade in bulk goods such as grain, meats, and dairy products, this has not prevented scholars from suggesting that these items were “undoubtedly” traded, but since they are perishable, they have disappeared from the record (Cline 2009: 95).

These proposals lead to one conclusion: the nature of this ancient economy was an open system of trade in surpluses from specialized production of bulk, necessary goods for the sake of profit. This was especially so after the supposed economic “boom” of eighth century Palestine and ancient Southwest Asia more generally. Individual entrepreneurs, outside the clumsy restrictions of states and their red tape, found new ways to turn a profit. Country traded with city, sedentary farmers with pastoral nomads, and vice versa. Ships crisscrossed the seas and sailed up and down the rivers, donkey and then camel caravans traversed coastal routes, mountains, and deserts, laden with wares in an increasingly integrated pattern of trade. Trade, it seems, formed the backbone of the economy (Borowski 1987: 2003; Esse 1991: 103-4; Grigson 1995; Rosen 1995; Dandamaev 1996; 2009 [1974]: 60-63; Lamberg-Karlovsky 1996; Thompson 1999: 118-19, 124-29; Finkelstein and Silberman 2001; Finkelstein and Mazar 2007; Hesse and Wapnish 2001; Goddeereis 2002: 368-69; Greenberg 2002: 13; Hesse and Wapnish 2002; Graslin 2005; Monroe 2005; Holladay 2006; Katz 2008; Monroe 2009; Coomber 2010: 77-133). The reason: as with all of us, farmers sought to raise their standard of living, with better housing, clothes, tools, and even some prestige items that would impress the neighbours (Herzog 1997: 7).

Of Acquisition, Preciosities, and Busybodies

The weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred sixty-six talents of gold, besides that which came from the men of the road and the to-and-fro of the busybodies (1 Kgs 10:14-15).

3. A comparable proposal has been made concerning fourth millennium Uruk (Algaze 2008; Dercksen 2004; Hald 2008, 15-19, 30). This proposal has suffered a series of telling critiques (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 204-5; Emberling and McDonald 2003; Schwartz 2001; Liverani 2006).
Given this situation, one would expect a comprehensive metaphorization of such entrepreneurial farmers and their activities in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, the only appearance of anything that resembles an entrepreneur is a king and a city—Solomon and Tyre, found respectively in 1 Kings 10 and the prophecy of destruction in Ezekiel 27-28. Since I deal with the Ezekiel text elsewhere, let me focus on Solomon. The text I quoted in my opening epigraph concerning the ships of Tarshish contains in microcosm the image of Solomon (1 Kgs 10,22). Solomon appears here as the quintessential merchant king, who brings prosperity to the united kingdom by engaging—among many other ventures—in trade. Two items in this text are worth noting. To begin with, these ships “used to come” (bw) every three years. The text speaks not of ships engaged in the business of export and import. Instead, the ships come, bringing items to Solomon and his court. Their function is to acquire items. But those items are intriguing: valuable metals (gold and silver; see the verses preceding this one for the vast amounts of such metals in Jerusalem), expensive ornamental material (ivory) and exotic animals (apes and peacocks, or perhaps rare fowl). No mention is made of bulk goods, such as grains, meats, dairy products, or vegetables. Instead, acquisition and preciousities are the key elements of an ideal image, projecting a picture of how an Israelite empire might have appeared. It is clearly drawn from the realities of actual empires, whether Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, or Persian, each of them providing an ideal to which t might aspire, but which they rarely if ever attained.

At this point, I must introduce a crucial distinction, between exchange in bulk and in preciousities: trade in bulk has small profit margins, and requires cheap transport and complex logistics; by contrast, the exchange of a small amount of non-essential preciousities with high value (tangible and intangible) takes place where they are difficult to acquire due to high risks, prohibitively expensive transport, and limited logistics. While bulk trade is for the whole population, preciousities are for those who can afford it—the small ruling class. It follows, then, that in pre-capitalist societies, bulk exchange is marginal, decentralised, and local, undertaken between nearby settlements (usually in sight of one another) and in light of subsistence needs, while exchange in preciousities may take place over greater distances, for it requires minimal and sporadic interaction. The only form of bulk acquisition was for feeding pal-

4. For comparable and much longer lists, see EA 14, 22, 25 (Moran 1992, 27-37, 51-61, 72-84; see also Nam 2012, 70-73)
5. Many were the minor potentates who attempted to emulate the Assyrians and the Great (Persian) King (Briant 2002, 172, 201-2; Long 1984, 75-76)
6. The initial distinction comes from Wallerstein, but see also the useful discussion in Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997, 52-54, 204, 248) They distinguish between: BGN, bulk-goods networks; PGN, prestige-goods networks, PMN, political/military networks; IN, information networks. In pre-modern periods, BGNs are smallest, restricted to seas and rivers and contained within states. PGNs and INs, by contrast, expanded much further, since they rely on minimal interaction and on intermediation. Note that
ace and estate, a command economy that operated by means of estates and taxation. Occasionally, in a preciosity-poor region, some bulk goods may be sent to a neighbouring little kingdom for the sake of acquiring preciosities.

Back to the text: within the wider context of 1 Kgs 10,22, the focus remains consistent, namely, a concern with preciosities and the acquisition thereof. In one year the gold that "came to" Solomon was a mythical 666 talents, which were made into shields, cups, and all the other vessels. It was used to overlay a throne made of nothing less than ivory. So much gold was available that silver was counted as nothing. Not short on hyperbole, our anonymous author(s) state of Solomon’s throne, "Nothing like it was ever made in any kingdom" (1 Kgs 10,20). He is greater than even those emperors. The Queen of Sheba too arrives, riding camels laden with spices, gold, and precious stones. As she unloads these exotic items, she is overwhelmed by Solomon’s wealth and wisdom, which surpass any report she has heard. To add to the influx, an appended couple of verses (1 Kgs 10,11-12) include Hiram of Tyre, who brings from Ophir yet more precious stones and the rare almug wood, which is used for temple and palace building, for lyres and harps for the singers.

The important feature of these stories is what may be called the idea of exchange. They may belong to the genre of legend (Long 1984: 119-20), full of dreams of grandeur, but the assumed function of exchange is to acquire goods. All of these preciosities travel in one direction: to Solomon (see also 1 Kings 4,20-5,6 [ET 4,20-6]). As was the case even with the Persian Empire, which is supposed by some to be the most “commercial” of all (Liverani 1987), the emphasis is thoroughly centripetal, in which tribute and trade merge into one (Briant 2002: 201). There is little sense of exporting goods, let alone two-way exchange, a favourable balance of trade, of the weighing of risks, of outlays, losses, returns, and investment. Nor is there any presence of the brisk trade in bulk agricultural goods that appeared in the proposals I surveyed above. This applies just as much to the "men of the road and the to-and-fro of the busybodies" (‘ānšē ḥattārīm ānishar ḥārāḵēlīm) of 1 Kings 10,15. Even in the Greek world and its phase of colonization, the prime function of trade was the acquisition of goods one did not have, to be paid for by whatever means were available—mines, plunder, or the necessary evil of merchants (Ste. Croix 2004: 349-70). Wallerstein’s observation may well
due to the virtual absence of BGNs in ancient Southwest Asia, PMN is the crucial element in state power.

7. For Finkelstein and Mazar, the Queen of Sheba mutates into Solomon’s “trading partner”, “undoubtedly” reflecting the presence of the “lucrative Arabian trade” under Assyrian domination (Finkelstein and Mazar 2007, 116; see also Bright 1980, 215).
8. Ste. Croix gives the example of the Piraeus, the port of Athens, which charged the same tax for ships entering and leaving the port. The point: if one was concerned to ensure a balance of trade in favor of exports, one would hardly tax ships leaving port. Exactly the same practice is found in Egypt during the Persian Empire, where every
read as commentary on this text concerning Solomon: the acquisition of preciosities "depended on the political indulgence and economic possibilities of the truly wealthy" (Wallerstein 2011 [1974]: 20). I cannot help wondering whether the entrepreneurial farmers we met a little earlier were also hankering after the odd ingot of gold, or perhaps an ape or a peacock, some almug building materials, or some of those affordable spices that Solomon had acquired.

One may object: what about 1 Kgs 10,28-29, which reads:

And horses went out [חָנַף] for Solomon which were from Egypt and Kue [or linen; בַּדָּא] and Linen; the king’s busybodies [סְחר] acquired [לָכַּה] them from Kue at a price. And a chariot came up [לְהָנִיך] and went out [חָנַף] from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred and fifty; so for all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram they brought them out [חָנַף] by their hand. 9

Surely here is the legendary merchant king, trading for profit, even if the items in question are the rather expensive horses and chariots.10 Of course, the effect is mitigated significantly if the crucial terms are given their proper sense: what is in many recent interpretations seen to be "export" is simply "go out" (חָנַף) and the subject is either horse or chariot and not an entrepreneurial Solomon; "import" is actually "acquire" or "get" (לָכַּה).

As for sohar, its root (סְחר) means to go around and about, to scurry, bearing largely the same sense as רֹכל, the participle of רָכַל. The semantic fields are revealing, for sohar also means an enchanter or sorcerer, while רֹכל bears the sense of slanderer. The basic meaning is then one who bustles about, a traveller, a middleman who acquires the exotic goods desired by the politically powerful and wealthy. However, given the marginal status of such operators, indeed the disdain in the prophetic literature, I would suggest that "busybodies" or even "hustler" captures best the nuances of sohar and רֹכל.11 If we add another term translated as "merchant" or "trader"—Kēnā‘an or

ship entering and leaving an Egyptian port had to pay a levy. Even more, each ship on departure paid a flat tax called the "silver of the men" (Briant 2002, 385).

9. Compare the NRSV, which finds here a fully-fledged market economy, driven by profit: "Solomon's import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king's traders received them from Kue at a price. A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred fifty; so through the king's traders they were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram."

Other recent versions offer similar renderings.

10. Brueggemann thinks so, designating this and the whole of 1 Kings 10 as "what we of late have come to call the global economy" (Brueggemann 2000, 138; see also Bright 1980, 216-17). Many thanks to Christina Petterson's SBL paper, "King Solomon and the Global Economy," from 2010 for insights into this passage.

11. See also Gen 23,17; 2 Chr 9,14; Neh 3,31-32; 13,20; Prov 31,14; Song 3,6; Isa 23,2-3; Ezek 17,4; 27,3, 22-23, 36, 38,13; Nah 3,16. Odell, who follows Block, simply misses the biblical tenor of the words with his suggestion of "broker" and "agent" respectively (Block 1997-1998, vol. 2, 68; Odell 2005, 348).
Kênaʾānî, Canaan or Canaanite—then the full disdain becomes apparent. The semantic field of this word has the basic sense of becoming low, or lowly (knn), then folding out to include both Canaanite and “merchant.” Given these overlapping meanings, “groveler” captures the sense best. Comparable terms in our time might be used car salesman, real estate agent, or perhaps “cockroach.” Here indeed is the clearest expression of the marginal status of such a busybody, for he is a grovelling foreigner as well. It is worth noting that the despised merchants never formed a sub-class, a “middle-class” with its own identity. Instead, we find that if merchants did gather in one place, they were excluded from the usual categories of political life. Thus, the Cappadocian tablets (from ancient Kanesh in the Hittite kingdom) indicate that foreign merchants were segregated, in a type of economic apartheid, in a karum, a “harbor” or “quay,” or in a warbartum, a trading factory (Giorgadze 1991: 268-69).

12. Isa 23,8; Ezek 16,29; 17,4; Hos 12,8 [ET 7]; Zeph 1,11; Zech 14,21; Prov 31,24. In these texts, sohar appears as a parallel with Kênaʾān. Indeed in Ezek. 17,4, ‘ereṣ Kênaʾān bears the double sense of “land of Canaan” and “land of trade.” So also Zeph 1,11 with its ‘am Kênaʾān. This foreign sense is doubled by the connection with the busy woman of Proverbs 31, who not only acts like a sohar (v. 14), but also deals with Kênaʾānî (v. 24). The picture is less flattering than is often assumed.

13. This disdain of the middlemen or busybodies appears throughout the prophetic literature, where they become a byword for all that is unsavory (Isa 23,2-3, 8, 17; Lam 1,1; Ezek 17,3-4; 27-28; 38,13; Hos 12,8-9 [ET 7-8]; Nah 3,16; Zeph 1,11; Zech 14,21; see also Neh.13,20). I would suggest that Akkadian term for such a person — tamkāru (dam-gâr), to which Hebrew mkr is related — has comparable, derogatory connotations. To begin with, the root meaning of “sell” has sinister connections with debt-slavery: one “sells” and thereby “betrays” children, family members, even oneself. Further, a number of texts indicate attitudes towards such tamkāru. An excellent example is a response from the thirteenth century king of Hatti, Hatusili III, to complaints concerning the activities of such middlemen (from Ura) in the town of Ugarit (CTH 93). “The men of the city of Ura, the merchants, are a heavy burden upon the land of your subject,” writes the king of Ugarit to Hattusili III. Why? They acquire houses and fields, force local bondage into debt-bondage, and generally disrupt life by their prolonged presence. Hattusili responds by demanding that they return home for the winter and forbids them from acquiring houses and fields by whatever means (Beckman 1999, 177). Further examples may be found in the Amarna letters, where merchants are killed (EA 8; [Moran 1992, 12-13]; in the fifth law from the Hittite code, which simply begins “If anyone kills a merchant” (Roth 1997, 217); and in a text from Ugarit (PRU, IV, 17.229), in which a village had to pay compensation for killing a merchant who had come to collect a fine (Heltzer 1976, 63; see further Alster 1996; Jursa 2002, 204-5).

14. Gen 37,27-28 also expresses this sense of busybodies as foreign and not “ours,” for here they are Midianite (or Ishmaelite). That they engaged in both exchange in preciousities and a little human trafficking only adds to their despicable status. This is hardly evidence for a “lucrative Arabian trade that flourished under Assyrian domination in the eighth to seventh centuries B.C.E” (Finkelstein and Mazar 2007, 46).
Once we read the story closely, it turns out to be less a commercial enterprise for profit and more a rather lucrative task of despised middlemen acquiring horses for Solomon, along with the kings of the Hittites and of Aram. In this legendary tale, they needed horses and chariots and someone who was prepared to get them. That those middlemen would have been rewarded handsomely for acquiring the precious metals, stones, apes, peacocks, and horses goes without saying.

To sum up, the biblical texts that deal explicitly with exchange or “trade” have the consistent themes of acquisition rather than trade for profit, the overwhelming concern with preciosities, and with the denigration of merchants and their activities. I have suggested that a better term for such “merchants” is “middlemen,” or indeed “groveler,” those outsiders responsible for acquiring preciosities for the political indulgence of a small ruling class.

Tall Tales

All her people groan as they search for bread; they exchange their treasures for food to revive their strength (Lam 1,11).

Obviously a discrepancy appears between the proposals of a spate of recent suggestions concerning economics and the biblical texts. In the former, a world emerges of bustling trade in bulk surpluses of everyday staples within an ancient market economy; in the latter, the metaphorized idea of exchange is focused on the acquisition of preciosities by the wealthy and powerful through despised busybodies. However, it is in these times acceptable to dismiss the biblical material as misleading, claiming that archaeology gives us the real data. This assumption is based on embarrassingly crude referential assumptions concerning biblical texts, assumptions that are far from my concerns in this study. However, let me return to the three key terms of the “partly capitalist” world of ancient Southwest Asia: surplus, trade, and market. Far be it from me to argue that there were no surpluses, exchanges, or markets. But much turns on what we mean by those terms.

Surplus

To begin with, did farmers specialize in, sheep, cattle, or grains, building up stockpiles to trade with the cities, between villagers and nomads, and over long distances? Recent work on both herd management and crop-growing presents a reality of subsistence survival. Herds typically had 2/3 sheep and 1/3 goats, given their hardiness, low use of water and fodder, and versatility in terms of meat, milk, and fibre. Since bovines drink and eat much, the few in a village were shared for traction.15 Growing crops—mainly barley, glume wheat (emmer and einkorn) and lentils16—involves a collective system of

16. Minor crops include various types of pea, chickpeas, grapes, figs, dates, olives and nuts.
land shares\textsuperscript{17} that were reallocated every year or two by the elders or village council.\textsuperscript{18} Three key features determined these activities: diversity, security, and optimal use. Diversity appears in terms of animal and plant species, as well as all of the animal and plant parts. In turn, diversity ensures security by reducing risk: one does not suffer catastrophically when disaster hits. For instance, if disease hits the sheep, the goats will survive until the fast breeding sheep recover (Binford 2001: 193; Wharton 1971; Piro 2008, 2009). Optimal usage—in contrast to maximal usage for the sake of profit—ensures longer term survival; something is always left over for an emergency if one systematically under-utilizes pasturage and water (Hayden 2000; Redding 1988, 1993).\textsuperscript{19} Optimal too is the population size: the number of people is kept below carrying capacity, for an excess population threatens survival.

All of this has a direct bearing on the question of surpluses. If one follows the myth of Adam Smith, then the production of surplus for the purpose of trucking, bartering, and exchanging is supposed to be a basic, inescapable feature of human existence. But is this true for subsistence survival? Not at all, for the production of small surpluses was a necessary feature of survival, a reserve to carry the group over a bad harvest, drought, burnt crops, animal disease, or any other untoward but all too common event that threatened survival. Surplus is thereby a response to ever-present uncertainty rather than a strategy for profit (Sahlins 1971: 30; Widstrand 1975; Ingold 1980: 134-140; Jochim 1981: 210; Liverani 1982: 253; Rowley-Conwy and Zvelebil 1989; Sasson 2010: 7-10). The last thing on the mind of such farmers was the production of surplus for turning a quick profit.

Exchange

What of the situation regarding exchange? In the reconstructions I outlined earlier, trade in bulk staples is central. Yet, here we face a rather inconvenient truth: missing is the evidence for large-scale and long-distance exchange in the bulk staples of grains and meats, everyday building materials, raw materials and manufactured goods. As I noted earlier, for an economy in which surplus is produced through trade, bulk is the key. The first time such a network functioned was in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, providing

\begin{itemize}
  \item[17.] The relevant term from the Hebrew Bible is \textit{ḥeḷēq hašadeh}, more often functioning as a metaphor (Gen 33,19-20; Ruth 4,3; 2 Sam 14,30-31; 2 Kings 9,21, 25; Jer 12,10; Amos 4,7; note also the verb \textit{ḥiq}, “apportion” in Jer 37,12).
  \item[18.] Again, the studies of such a persistent practice outnumber the ones I can reference here (Bergheim 1894, 28-42; Weulersse 1946; Granott 1952; Diakonoff 1963, 1974; Adams 1982; Seeden and Kaddour 1984; Firestone 1990; Schäbler 2000; Nadan 2003, 2006; Wilkinson 2003, 2010; Wilkinson and Barbanes 2000; Wilkinson et al. 2005; Guillaume 2012).
  \item[19.] The mythological images of the patriarchs, kings, and landlords with vast herds, including sheep, goats, oxen, donkeys, and occasionally camels, become simultaneously metaphorical signals of power and wealth, and images of unbelievable excess with an undercurrent of disapproval (apart from Solomon, see also Gen 12,16; 13,2-6; 20,14; 24,34; 30,25-43; Job 1,2; 42,12).
\end{itemize}
the basis for the first commercial, capitalist empire. Not only did the Dutch acquire the foodstuffs for their own consumption—taking over the Hanseatic trade routes in the Baltic—but they turned raw materials into manufactured goods which were then sold throughout Europe at a price that was lower than local manufacture (Wallerstein 2011 [1974]). This situation is clearly not the case with ancient Southwest Asia.

However, other forms of exchange existed, but what is meant by exchange is crucial. Three points are relevant. To begin with, the matter of scale is often forgotten as scholars rush to see highways and byways clogged with caravans, to espy shipping lanes bustling with merchant vessels. We struggle to understand a vast landscape of thin and scattered population, of paltry states whose claims to be “empires” are empty chest-beating, of small towns of 3,000-4,000 people—Jerusalem included—euphemistically called “cities,” and of the very few middlemen. In this context, the cargo was miniscule indeed.

Further, the logistics of transporting goods made the cost prohibitive for long-distance exchange. Here the “friction of distance” is crucial, especially in terms of labour, for there is an exponential relationship between distance and the amount of labour involved: the further one travels, the greater is the friction (Milevski 2011: 32; Adams 1979: 396; Hopkins 1996: 125). Some examples: it cost the same to ship goods across the Mediterranean as it cost for 120 kilometres overland (Ste. Croix 1981: 11-12); a donkey caravan took six weeks to cover the 1200 kilometres from Kanesh in Anatolia to Asshur in mid-Mesopotamia (Roaf 1990: 18); if the cargo was grain, then the animals used would have eaten the whole supply well before the end of the journey (Mieroop 1997: 169). And the staple pack animal, the donkey, needs to stay close to water sources, so it cannot traverse arid regions. Was transport by ship more feasible? Again the facts suggest not. The considerable resources needed to build a decent riverboat, let alone a sea-going ship, as well as the fact that most of the few river and sea ports were controlled by rulers, means that the cost of waterborne exchange was not inconsiderable.

It formed part of a network of inter-palatial exchange. Most importantly, the purpose of such exchange was quite different. If one belonged to the small and relatively wealthy ruling class, then one sought to acquire the appropriate appurtenances and tools of power, justifying the process with what may be called the propaganda of acquisition and prestige (Liverani 2006: 41).

20. As Wilson observed already many decades ago, “It is the smallness of scale, so hard for modern Europeans to grasp imaginatively, which is the fundamental characteristic of primitive life” (Wilson 1941, 10).

21. For an outline of the major Mesopotamian river and sea routes, see (Moorey 1994, 7-10). However, he overstresses the ease and ubiquity of such activity.

22. “It was not a matter of exchanging food for manufactured goods and specialized services, but of exchanging luxuries for luxuries or to meet intangible social obligations and thereby to maintain or increase one’s status” (Schloen 2001, 199).
diers required rare hard metals for weapons, as well as horses and chariots for mobility in battle; rulers “needed” precious stones, fine alcohol, expensive clothes (well beyond the single cloak of a peasant household), and exotic animals such as elephants, monkeys, or indeed peacocks, bulls’ heads, and hippopotamus parts (Diakonoff 1991: 86; Milevski 2011: 146-63). Obviously, they are the preciosities I noted earlier, but the overwhelming aim was to get hold of such goods. It was very much like a “vacuum cleaner, a huge military and administrative apparatus designed to secure a constant flow of goods from periphery to center” (Larsen 1979: 100; see also Adams 1979: 396).

This situation poses a distinct problem for those who wish to argue for an international market economy in ancient Southwest Asia, or even a pattern of redistribution. Haunted by the preciosities in ample evidence, they follow one or both of two strategies. Either the preciosities are vital for the whole economy, in the sense that such items indicate widespread wealth, or scholars clutch at elusive straws that supposedly indicate extensive exchange in bulk staples. It may be a second century shipwreck such as the one at Ulu Baran (Kas) in which the empty amphorae are imaginatively filled with bulk goods (neglecting the need for ballast), despite the overwhelming presence of preciosities. It may be pottery shards from relatively distant sources, although analysis typically avoids quantitative concern, for that reveals small amounts indeed (Sherratt and Sherratt 1991; Sherratt and Sherratt 1993; Zerner, Zerner, and Winder 1993; Master 2003; Stern 1999; James 1996; Cline 2009; Gill 1991; Osborne 1996). Or it may be the few grains in a town such as Ashkelon—from the nearby highlands that lead to the fantasy of an “integrated market economy” (Stager and Master 2011: 737).

We are left with the intermittent networks of luxury items as the primary form of longer distance exchange—much as the ideal image in the texts concerning Solomon. In order to acquire the desirable preciosities, middlemen

23. The Old Assyrian donkey caravan exchange with Cappadocia in the second millennium fits into this context. Tin and woolen textiles from Mesopotamia were exchanged for Anatolian silver and gold, and the merchants were closely connected with the royal courts of Asshur and Anatolia, even if they enhanced their takings with some deals on the side (Renger 1984, 38; Schloen 2001, 80, 83; Mieroop 2002, 75-77; Veenhof 2006).

24. These include highly precious copper and tin ingots, pottery, blue-glass ingots, jewelry, scarabs, cylinder seals, bronze weapons and tools, jars with aromatic resin and beads, amber, ostrich eggshells, ivory (elephant and hippopotamus), logs of ebony, and some unworked raw materials.

25. For example, all of the Eastern Greek and Early Corinthian pottery found in the southern Levant in the seventh century BCE would have formed only part of the cargo of one ship passing along the coast (Waldbaum 2011, 141). Most pottery was exchanged locally, given the friction of distance (Milevski 2011, 39-88).

26. Occasionally, official texts mention amounts of grain to be shipped to a central location, but never the distance. It cannot have been great, since there is constant concern with spoiling (Lindenberger 2003, 33, 39, 53, 123, 130, 140).
undertook the dangerous and expensive task of doing so. They were royal servants and were rewarded for their tasks. Over and against the curiously intractable and very modern assumption that state and “commerce” are forever opposed to one another, these middlemen were also tax-collectors and diplomats. Rather than free-wheeling entrepreneurs, they were indentured agents in the service of a despot, engaged in gathering taxes internally and in inter-palace gift exchange externally (Heltzer 1976: 33-34; 1978: 123; Melikishvili 1978: 41; Zaccagnini 1987: 58; Kozyreva 1991: 104-5; Schloen 2001: 83-84; Dandamaev 2009 [1974]: 63; Cline 2009: 85). It is not for nothing that kings would call them “my merchants” (Moran 1992: 16, 112-13). Yet they were also treated as a necessary evil, as we saw earlier. Not only were they always under suspicion for making a killing on the side (Liverani 2006: 41-43), but the very same person (or, rather, clan) acquired preciosities for the court, collected taxes for the state, and—to add to the achievements of this multitasking wizard—engaged in usury and functioned as a landlord (Diakonoff 1982: 54; Mieroop 1999: 255-56; 2002: 71-72). 27 On all four counts, he could become very wealthy. On all four counts, he definitely became despised and hated. 28

But how would a potentate pay for these items? A nearby mine was helpful, perhaps of silver or another precious metal, as was plunder from raids, textiles, exotic timber from a forest in one’s domain, whole villages, even the minimal acquisition from taxation .... If one did actually have to exchange one item for another in order to acquire the desired goods, then that was a necessary evil. Prices were largely customary, varying mostly due to social, environmental, and political factors, although scarcity and difficulty of acquisition also played a role. 29 The availability of items to exchange was less a result of careful and rational economic planning than serendipity. 30

Markets

As for markets, the terminology of a global or international “market economy” is especially misleading, since it assumes that the type of market we

27. Already in the Old Babylonia of Hammurabi, dam-gârs acted on behalf of the palace, gathering the agricultural products from tenants on palatine estates, organising corvée labour, and disbursing of excess produce via patterns of debt and credit (Renger 2000; Goddeeris 2002, 338-46).

28. These “skills” also enabled him to make the transition through the long “crisis” of the late second millennium and emerge on the other side with new opportunities for multiple forms of extraction.

29. Thus, Hebrew melîhûr (1 Kings 21,2 etc.) means customary price, with little sense of the “economic” value of an item. Without a system of commodities that relate to one another, without assessments of the costs involved in production and circulation, and without efforts to raise or lower prices depending on demand, “price” takes on a very different, traditional, and customary sense.

30. An excellent example is the relatively large number of olive oil presses (along with weaving looms) found in seventh century Ekron (Schloen 2001, 140-46; contra Gitin 1997).
experience under capitalism—driven by the self-interest (greed) of the profit motive—is common for all markets. It also assumes a whole system of social networks, judicial framework, political structures, economic relations, and ideological patterns in which the market is itself metaphorized (Jameson 1991: 260-78; Wallerstein 1983). I do not speak of Polanyi’s misleading proposal of a non-market or marketless economy, for that assumes that markets operate as profit-generating mechanisms (Polanyi, Arensberg, and Pearson 1957: 12-26, 250-252; Dalton 1971: 131-134). Instead, I mean that markets have mostly operated without profit, for profit is but a late development of markets and is by no means universal.

Markets first spread for an entirely different reason: rulers had to find ways to provision armies. An ancient potentate had the option of engaging as many people for logistics as in his army. However, an alternative eventually presented itself: he could pay the soldiers in coins stamped with his own head. Then he could demand that taxes be paid in coin. Obviously, the farmers in question would then seek to get hold of those coins by exchanging them for provisions with the soldiers. The earlier intermittent practices of exchange—local and decentralized, usually between villages within view (2-4 kilometres apart), for items such as flint and pottery, and across phytogeographic regions (Milevski 2011: 132-145)—now gained a whole new life. Fostered by the new conditions, local markets began to spring up, meats and vegetables and legumes and whatnot were exchanged, coins changed hands. Then the farmers and village communities could pay their taxes. Once this became a pattern, we see again and again that the spread of coinage followed the path of an army receiving pay in coins. Provisions were supplied, prostitutes found, not a little petty theft undertaken, and so on. When this method was seen to work, it was applied to requisitioning just about everything, instead of engaging labour to work on palatine estates. From China, through India, to ancient Southwest Asia, this is the way the first markets arose. In other words, the most efficient and practical way for markets to spread is through the activity of the government. Markets are thereby a by-product of government needs, rather than the latter stifling the enterprise of the former (Graeber 2011: 49-50).

This assumes the prior invention of coins, which happened at about the same time, from 600-500 BCE, in the three parts of the world just mentioned. Intriguingly, the technologies were distinct and do not seem to have been borrowed—casting in the Great Plain of China, punching in the Ganges river valley of northern India, and stamping in the lands surrounding Aegean

31. Even in this context, and due to the immediate need to acquire the necessary coinage for taxes, the pattern of supply-demand-price can hardly be said to function (Dale 2010, 145-46).
32. On the spread of this system with the late Roman army, see Centano and Franco (2011; 2011).
33. In light of the Western economic depression since 2008, a number of new studies of money have appeared (Goodchild 2009; Graeber 2011; Von Braun 2012)
Sea, beginning in Lydia. For some reason, local rulers decided that the long-standing credit systems were no longer adequate and began issuing coins out of precious metals, metals that had been used in exchange and usually stored in temples (Monedero 2011). The reason for the move to coinage was economic and social unrest, with armies on the move, marauding bands, and gangs. With the breakdown of large states (Warring States China, Iron Age Greece, and pre-Mauryan India) and the efforts at new levels of imperial expansion in ancient Southwest Asia, soldiers and brigands were constantly on the move. Itinerant armed men became a credit risk. So if one needed to engage in a transaction, it was far better to have something that can be weighed and handed over than rely on credit (which can operate only when you know your neighbours). Soldiers might loot such stuff, but they can also be paid and can pay without having to worry about credit. “For much of human history, then, an ingot of gold or silver, stamped or not, has served the same role as the contemporary drug dealer’s suitcase full of unmarked bills: an object without a history, valuable because one knows it will be accepted in exchange for other goods just about everywhere, no questions asked” (Graeber 2011: 213).

Conclusion: On Economics Imperialism

I close with a question. In light of this rather obvious evidence, why have so many seen fit to argue for a busy “market” economy based on the trade of commercial surpluses? I suggest it is due to a wider context of economics imperialism. This imperialism is enabled by a process in which neoclassical economics (the “mainstream”) attains the status of a false universal— applicable to all human activity—through a process of chronic reductionism. In their landmark study, Fine and Milonakis (2009; 2009) speak of a triple reductionism in neoclassical economics: to the individual as the basic unit of analysis, an individual that is rational, self-interested, and focused on utility; to the “market” without any social basis; and to a “market” devoid of history. That is, the establishment of this economic theory is a process of individualizing, desocialising, and dehistoricising economic analysis. I would add that this process also involved de-theologizing, if not de-biblicising (Boer 2014). Such reductionism provided the dialectical basis for economics imperialism: having excised social concerns, class, institutions, history, and religion, this redefined neoclassical economics then engaged, and continues to do so vigorously today, in colonizing these and every other area of the social sciences and humanities. Particularly from the 1980s onwards—with the “fall” of communism—the extraordinarily narrow principles of rationality and equilibrium became a “universal grammar” for analysing human behaviour, institutions, history, geography, neural networks (neuro-economics), and even religion (McCleary 2010). The myth of Adam Smith—that human beings naturally “truck, barter and exchange one thing for another” (Smith 1776 [2000]: I.2.1; see Graeber 2011: 24)—seemed finally true. In light of this development, it is not difficult to see how the suggestion of a “partly capitalist” world can be constructed in the ancient Levant, ancient Southwest Asia, or...
indeed any ancient society. That the bulk of such studies were published from the late 1980s onwards, precisely when economics imperialism became rampant, should come as no surprise.

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Fleets of Tarshish


