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Politics is ultimately determined by the socioeconomic situation. That situation generates divisions in labor and thereby class, and from there politics arises. So I begin by focusing on the socioeconomic tensions as the basis of politics. The key tension is between a system of palatine estates and the subsistence survival agriculture of village communities, a tension that characterized the marginal economic zone of the southern Levant in which Israel sparked briefly before becoming an imperial province. But how do texts respond to this situation? I suggest that they do so in mediated and unexpected ways, attempting to resolve the socioeconomic tension in the production of their stories, poetry, myths, and song. Neither windows onto reality nor expressions of the ideologies of the various groups that purportedly produced them, texts have indirect and contradictory connections with the socioeconomic context to which they respond. In order to show how, I deal with Genesis 1-3, the narrative of Joseph and Moses in Genesis 41-Exodus 15, Job, Proverbs, and 1 Samuel 8.

ESTATES VERSUS VILLAGE COMMUNITIES

I propose that the constitutive economic contradiction in the southern Levant of the first millennium was one between palatine estates and the agricultural labor of village communities (Diakonoff 1982; 1999, 21–55). Estates were initially a feature of temples (as in fourth-millennium Sumer with its en, or supreme priest), which formed the focus of activities in more powerful towns or “little kingdoms,” as they called such places themselves (Diakonoff 1991b, 37; Liverani 1982, 250; 2005, 7). Soon enough, the estates were subsumed under the power of the palace. The basic purpose of the estates was the supply of “goods for a minority” (Diakonoff 1999, 36), that is, to supply those who were not gainfully employed—priests, monarchs, and their perpetual dinner guests—with food, alcohol, and textiles. After all, they needed to live in the way to which they had become accustomed. Estates were therefore established in the vicinity of temples and then ruling centers, administered either directly
by functionaries or by tenure to landlords. Those who labored on them were indentured permanently or temporarily (corvee, conquest, and debt-labor). Given the perpetual labor shortage, the estates constantly sought to draw more laborers from the village communities, with little concern for the continued viability of the latter.

Why not simply tax the village communities instead of establishing estates? Two reasons are relevant. First, the power of the petty despots tended to be intermittent and uncertain. They might make grandiloquent claims concerning the vastness of their lands (1 Kings 4:21), but the reality was quite different, for without elaborate administrative apparatus, clear borders, and the ability to police the territory claimed, the real power exercised was quite weak. For this reason, the ability to tax villages regularly was not within their power. The farther away a collection of villages was from the capital, the weaker was the power. If villages found the burdens of corvee labor or taxation too onerous, they would simply move out of harm’s way—to a distant place or even into the mountains to join the ever-present Habiru. Second, villages were taxed at 10 percent, while estates supplied between one-half and two-thirds of the produce going to the temple or the palace. Estates were clearly the better economic option, for they enabled higher yields and could be policed reasonably consistently.

As for the village-communes themselves, the diverse and versatile mechanisms of animal husbandry (with 2:1 ratios of sheep and goats) and crop growing (Sasson 2010; Hald 2008, 44–121; Hole 1991) are of less interest on this occasion than the social determination of economic life. That life was centered on what Soviet-era Russian scholars called the extended-family household commune or a village-commune (Diakonoff 1974; 1975; 1982; 32; 1991a; 88; 1991b; 34–35; Jankowska 1969; 1991; 253; Vasilev and Stuchevskii 1967; 28–12; Bartlett 1990), and what Western scholars have dubbed mshafs' farming (Wilkinson 2003; 2010; Guillaume 2012, 28–42). It designs a strikingly persistent approach to subsistence agriculture, largely because it has been tried and tested. Typically, farmers lived in a village cluster, with a population of 75 to 150 and coterminous with the clan, although smaller settlements often had less than seventy-five (Knight 2011, 122–123). From here, farmers would go out to the fields to work, as archaeological investigation of such settlements and their pathways indicates (Wilkinson 2010, 56–57; 1994; 2003; Casana 2007). But those fields were not held in perpetual possession by the farmers. Instead, noncontiguous strips of land were allocated to each household for cultivation. In the Bible, this is the heqat hasadeh of Genesis 33:19–20; Ruth 4:3; 2 Samuel 14:30–31; 2 Kings 9:21, 25; Jeremiah 12:10; Amos 4:7 (see also Josh. 14:2; 18:2–10; Kitz 2000). These were social units of measurements rather than clear demarcations of land for the purpose of ownership. They would usually be of considerable length (up to one kilometer, or along the twisting path of a terrace in areas such as the Judean highlands), but with a width of a few furrows. At set times, usually annually or biannually, those strips were reallocated on the basis of need, fertility, labor power, and so on. The means of such reallocation varied, whether by lot, by all the adult males, a council of elders, or perhaps a village headman. Needless to say, the process involved all manner of unwritten rules and much argument, but the outcome was that the strips were reallocated.

Collective activity was inescapable within the village and between villages that were two to four kilometers apart, for the individual was helpless in the face of natural and social disaster. Thus, kinship, both highly flexible and embedded in the patriarchal household, was crucial. A further factor was the advantage of combined labor, whether with plough teams, sowing, or harvesting. Finally, the close-knit village-commune, with its headman and council of elders, was also advantageous for protection and defense against raiders. We may, following Roberts, describe these three factors as the communality of assent, of economizing, and of enforcement (Roberts 1996, 35–37).

The Estate of Eden

With this proposed reconstruction in mind, let me turn to a number of biblical texts that respond to this situation. That they do so in a number of unexpected and mediated ways will become clear as the analysis unfolds. I begin with the two myths of Genesis 1–3, in which the underlying pattern is the ordering of domesticated agricultural space. Thus, the deity "planted a garden in Eden, in the east" (Gen. 2:8), in which he puts the being—Adam—just created. The specific task of this being is to till the garden and keep it (Gen. 2:15). Genesis 1 reinforces this image, with mention of "plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it" (Gen. 1:22–22; see also Gen. 2:9, 16). Of course, this agricultural landscape is extended somewhat to include the whole of nature, more so with the animals than the plants. While the animals include "cattle" (heima) as a generic marker for domesticated types, they also include creeping things, animals of the field, wild animals, birds of the air, sea creatures, indeed every kind of living creature (Gen. 1:20–22; 1:24–25; 2:19–20). These are all under the dominion of human beings, a dominion that is marked by the act of naming (Gen. 2:19–20). The created world is ideally an agricultural one: domestication is the norm. At this level, the domesticated agricultural space is ultimately the deity's own creation, a divine ordering of the world for the sake of human flourishing. That act of domestication turns uncultivated land—which is formless and void—into what is cultivated. Here we may detect a trace of that perpetual problem in ancient Southwest Asia of vast stretches of uncultivated land. Given the smallness of the population and the continual shortage of able hands, the issue was not the shortage of land but the ability to cultivate that land.

The question remains as to whether the agricultural space in question applies to the village communities or the estates. Generically, it would seem to be both. Yet, other signals in the text lean toward estates rather than village communities. The tasks of keeping and tilling the land are mere tokens of labor, for the deity is the one actually responsible for making the plants grow and the animals flourish (Gen. 1:11–12; 24–25; 29; 2:8–9; see also Gen. 9:3). Everything seems to grow of its own accord, so that all the first humans need do is avail themselves of the abundant produce. Here we find metaphorical traces of a ruling-class perspective on estates. From this perspective, estates do seem to produce of their own accord. The actual labor is effaced, for the productiveness of estates is attributed not to human labor but to divine abundance. Sitting in palaces and temples and towns, estates may well appear as such. Food, textiles, and luxury items seem to gush forth from the estates, mediated perhaps by landlords. But in classic style, the labor involved in their production somehow disappears—as if there were no labor in estates. For this reason, the differentiated man and woman (out of the undifferentiated "Adam") appear very much like royalty (Brueggemann 1987). They are the apex of creation (Gen. 1:26–28), needing only to avail themselves of the abundant produce that simply hangs from trees or from the stalks of seed-bearing plants. For these reasons, I suggest that gan, which is usually translated as "garden," should actually be translated as "estate."
Now tensions begin to appear in the myth, of which two are important for my argument. The first is that despite the effort to universalize the agricultural estates, a distinction still applies between the domesticated and the wild. Apart from the differentiation between domesticated ‘cattle’ and other animals, the one who causes trouble in the garden is specifically designated as a ‘wild animal’ (Gen. 3.1). The very unpredictability of such animals was a source not only of omens but also of potential danger (Foster 2002, 274; Scullock 2002, 364–367; Albertz 2008, 101). Further, the garden in question does have an outside, marked by the burly cherubim with the flaming sword (Gen. 3:24). This distinction is also marked by the need for discipline and obedience within the estate (Gen. 2:17). Obedience ensures the continued existence of the estate, or at least the continued presence of the man and woman within the estate, while disobedience signals what lies outside. This theme of disobedience brings me to the second tension, which is between the ruling-class nature of the man and woman within the garden and their peasant status outside. As a result of following the crafty advice of the serpent, the man is cursed to till ground full of thorns and thistles. Any food produced will now be the result of hard labor, by the sweat of his brow as the older translations would have it (Gen. 3:17–19). Ruling-class status has suddenly become peasant life.

This transition may be read as simple propaganda in favor of estate labor. In the perpetual drive to draw more labor into the estates from the village communities, the text of Genesis 3 may be seen as an advertisement for the easy life of estate labor in contrast to the back-breaking work of the village communities. However, I suggest that the text’s tensions give voice to the deeper ideology of palatial estates. The village communities become the hard lot of peasants, who are despised, while the estates are zones of ease and plenty. Little is to be gained from village life, while estates are clearly the better option—if you happen to be one of the functionaries of the palace and the temple. The catch is that Genesis 3 also unwittingly expresses a fear of the precariousness of such an easy life. It takes little to turn even the most comfortable ruling-class life into one of hard labor, pain, and death. After all, one is subject to a capricious deity.

**BETWEEN JOSEPH AND MOSES**

The second exhibit of a textual mediation of socioeconomic contradictions is the struggle between Joseph and Moses (Gen. 41–Exod. 15). Why Joseph? Is not the fight to the death between Pharaoh and Moses? The text does indeed attempt to switch the protagonists, pointing out that the new pharaoh did not know Joseph and therefore began to oppress the Israelites (Exod. 1:8). Rather than claim that the text deviously attempts to redirect the reader’s gaze, I prefer to see this as one of the many mediations of the basic conflict in the text. To draw out that conflict, I focus on four features: the estate–subsistence opposition itself; the insertion of distance between the opposition, now in terms of Egypt and Canaan; the pattern of traversing that distance; and the depth of rupture required to break the stranglehold of the estates.

First, Joseph clearly establishes a hyper-estate system once he achieves recognition and then power in Egypt. Genesis 41 tells the fabulous story in which Joseph is first called from prison to interpret the pharaoh’s double dream. Indeed, the fat cows of the dream (Gen. 41:11–8) already signal the tone of the narrative. Overfattened cows, to the point where they could hardly walk, were a distinct marker of relative affluence and power, and one can well imagine the idle rich dreaming about them. By contrast, the small number of bovines in rural villages were normally used for traction; they consumed vast amounts of water and fodder and were not normally used for consumption (Brewer 2002, 434–438). Having successfully interpreted the dream, Joseph is promptly appointed as the overseer of not one estate among many, but of a hyper-estate that is the land of Egypt itself (Gen. 41:33–45; see Skinner 1910, 301–302). Apart from the sheer embelishment of such an image, it also assumes the fiction of sweeping royal power that is found throughout ancient Southwest Asia. Petty despots routinely liked to claim they had more power than they could possibly manage (see 1 Kings 4:21). Now Joseph does what any estate manager would do if given free rein: he gathers up all the grain, so much of it that the people have nothing left for themselves and have to come to him for sustenance (Gen. 41:46–49, 53–57). Forget the requisition of one-third or perhaps one-half of the estate produce; Joseph wants it all. Yet produce is only half of the story, for the key lies with labor, and the best estate labor is indentured labor. So later in the story (Gen. 47:13–26), Joseph manipulates the situation so that people are forced to sell their bodies into slavery in order to eat.

The text says less concerning the other side of the opposition (Gen. 46:3–27), although I suggest that the clan of Jacob may be seen as the moment of the village community. The clan of “keepers of livestock” numbers seventy persons. Although this is an ideal number (marking fullness), that does not equate with the genealogical list (Gen. 46:27). I would suggest that it also marks—if we include women and children—the normal range of a village community. Clan and village community were usually coterminous, as suggested by Judges 6:24, 8:32; 2 Samuel 14:7; and Jeremiah 3:14 (Jankowska 1969, 230–231; Schloen 2003, 155–156; Liverani 2005, 21–22). It may be objected that the depiction is of a semi-nomadic group rather than a settled village community. However, the opposition between the “desert and the town” is far from clear, for village communities were highly mobile (seasonally or when under pressure from a despot) and nomadic groups would periodically settle (Schloen 2001, 155). In this light, both pastoral nomadism and sedentary agriculture were variations, with many overlaps, on the resilient economic form of subsistence survival.

The tale has already provided one instance of exacerbation (Joseph’s mega-estate), but another follows. Instead of the tension between estates and subsistence agriculture taking place in close proximity, that tension is stretched out, as it were, with each end pushed as far apart as possible. Rather than being in the same agricultural space, they are now placed far apart as possible. While Egypt is the locus of estates, that distance is emphasized by two features of the narrative: the physical amount of text that concerns this spatial separation (Gen. 44–50) and the narrative distance, then, emphasizes the economic gulf between estates and village communities.

The issue of traversing distance leads to the third point—namely, the co-option of labor for the estates. At its most obvious level, the story concerns clan squabbles and a grand for the estates. At its most obvious level, the story concerns clan squabbles and a grand
FORMAL AND ETHICAL CODES: JOB AND PROVERBS

The story of the violent break from the exoticized estate system in Egypt gains, as may be expected, other levels of complexity with the wilderness wanderings. Here Moses the liberator becomes also a tyrant against whom the people constantly murmur and rebel, so much so that the people clamor precisely for the Egyptians’ leeks, lentils, and Beshots (see, further, Boer 2014; Langston 2006, 4–8). But my interest is specifically in the way the socioeconomic tensions of the estates and subsistence agriculture are mediated through the texts. In this section, I consider a number of other texts in which these tensions leave their traces.

To begin with, I suggest that the much debated contradictions within and between the prologue-epilogue and poetry of Job may be seen also from the angle I have been pursuing. Obviously, the prologue depicts what may be called an upper-landlord, with his thousands of sheep, camels(!), oxen, and donkeys. More importantly, he has a multitude of slaves, indentured laborers to manage the flocks and deal with the crops. Even the life of leisure and partying of his sons and daughters betrays the ostentatious wastage of the unemployed ruling class (Job 1:14). However, more intriguing is the mark in the narrative of an all-too-familiar pattern: the periodic destruction of the power of the ruling class (Job 23:19). The explanations are pure legend—Sabaeans and Chaldean raiders, fire from heaven, and a wind from the desert—but the destruction of landlord estates and power at the hands of peasants, estate laborers, and bands of Habiru were common enough. Given the opportunity, they would eagerly hasten the demise of yet another hated landlord or, indeed, despot (Kozryeva 1991, 99; Yee 2007, 13–15). Indeed, the mythical accounts of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) and of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19) embody such a perspective in their own way, as do the warnings of 1 Samuel 8, the parable of the bramble in Judges 9:8–15, the long account of the failings of the kings of Israel and Judah and the eventual punishment in 1–2 Kings, and the account of the resistance by the “people of the land” and myriad other groups in Ezra–Nehemiah to the imposition of an imperial regime of plunder with the return of the exiles. As far as Job is concerned, the epilogue then also marks the effort once again to re-establish the estates in the ever-repeated cycle that is part of the struggle between subsistence survival and the palatine estate system (Job 42:10–17).

Questions remain as to how we may read the relations between the prologue-epilogue and the much larger poetic text of Job. At one level, the trenchant criticisms, the laments, the demolition of the arguments of his “friends,” and, above all, the challenge to Yahweh, who allows such suffering (and who is actually forced by Job to answer) may be read as a devastating undermining of all that justifies an estate system, as indeed of the later (first millennium BCE) tribute-exchange system that came to displace the estate system elsewhere in ancient Southwest Asia. If we see the excesses described in prologue and epilogue as implicit criticisms of the life Job leads, then those criticisms may enhance what is found in the poetic criticisms of the life Job leads; indeed, such criticisms may enhance what is found in the poetic criticisms of the life Job leads. But the text readily allows for a more nuanced reading, as Job 42:10–17 suggests. Job offers “blameless”—the persistent theme of the book (Fokkelman 2012, 189, 242–243) Job 42 offers "blameless"—the persistent theme of the book (Fokkelman 2012, 189, 242–243) Job 42 offers "blameless"—the persistent theme of the book (Fokkelman 2012, 189, 242–243) Job 42 offers “blameless”—the persistent theme of the book (Fokkelman 2012, 189, 242–243)
wife, the despising by children, and his bones clinging to his skin and flesh. Above all, I am
struck by Job 42:15–16:

My female slaves count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes.
I call to my slave, but he gives me no answer;
I must myself plead with him.

Truly, suffering must be real if even the indentured laborers treat one with disrespect and
ignore what one commands! No wonder he feels as though the “hand of God” has touched
him (Job 42:11; see also Job 30).3

Whereas Job reveals tensions at the level of textual structure, Proverbs does so on a dif-
ferent register again. Here it is clearly ideological, manifesting itself in what may be called
ethical oppositions. Proverbs is built on a series of contrasts, between wise and foolish,
prudent and simple, humble and proud, righteous and wicked, industrious and lazy, sound
and rotten, truth and lies, and, of course, between rich and poor.6 None of these terms is
ideologically innocent; indeed, none are innocent of class consciousness. While we may ini-
tially feel that the criticisms of the proud, the wicked, and the lying are directed at the idle
rich, it soon becomes apparent the positive virtues attach to the ruling class. They are the
ones who are wise, righteous, industrious, and therefore, rich. All of these are signs that they
have been blessed by God. It requires little imagination to see here the ethics and class con-
sciousness of landlords and of the perpetual dinner guests at the monarch’s table. Of course,
the despised are precisely those who work the estates or the village communities. They are
wicked, simple, lazy, rotten, and therefore, poor. At the same time, Proverbs reveals the sub-
tlety of this ruling-class consciousness, especially with the occasional mild warnings against
riches (Prov. 11:4, 28:13–16; 17:1, 5; 18:23). Are these perhaps relics of village wisdom?
If so, they have been co-opted into the subtle assertion that one should always attain to the
higher calling of humility, wisdom, and righteousness. These signposts on the way to real
and moral wealth; earthly gain is therefore a secondary concern, which should not distract
one from the higher virtues. Of course, the studied disdain of filthy lucre is possible only for
those who have more than enough, so that they need not worry themselves about the needs
of daily life. This is a far cry from the subsistence survival of the village communities.

CONCLUSION

By now it should be obvious that the ways texts respond, politically and ideologically, to
socioeconomic tensions are as varied as the texts themselves. Those attempts may involve
narrative ambivalences (Gen. 1–3), narrative structures (Gen. 41–Exod. 15), textual form
(Job) and ideological oppositions (Proverbs). Mediated and unexpected are these responses,
but they boil down to the fact that texts often attempt ideological and narrative resolutions
to socioeconomic contradictions. And the determinative contradiction is one between palat-
ine estates and the subsistence survival economy of village-communes, a contradiction that
was both constitutive and limiting.

However, I close on a slightly different note, which is actually a case of Freud’s observa-
tion that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. In 1 Samuel 8:11–18, we find a pure vignette of what
may be the expression of the village communities’ attitude to the palatine estate system. The

king, warns Samuel, will take your sons to “plough his ground and reap his harvest”; he will
force your daughters to be “perfumers and cooks and bakers.” Even this pattern of drawing
away more and more clan members to labor on estates is not enough, for the despotic will also
seize the “best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his func-
tionaries.” He will also tax the grain and animals of the village communities at 10 percent. The
result: “you shall be his slaves.” So it was with the palatine estate system.

NOTES

1. Out of the myriad interpretations of Genesis 1–3 (and I have consulted many), sur-
prisingly few deal with socioeconomic matters (Kennedy 1990; Steinberg 1993; Simkins 1996;
Yee 1999).

2. The “fatted calf” and “fatted cattle” in biblical texts thereby become signals of power and
excess (1 Sam. 2:8–24; 1 Kings 1:9, 19, 25; 2:17; Jer. 46:21; Amos 5:22).

3. This assertion of divine will, as well as the theme that Joseph prospered under divine pro-
tection, is one among many signals of biblical ambivalence over palatine estates and subsid-
ence agriculture. Many are seduced by the divine approval of Joseph (e.g., Kim 2010),
but others note the negative tone (e.g., Stone 2012).

4. For a useful recent overview of Exodus studies, see Doezema’s Methods for Exodus
(Doezeman 2010).

5. Surprisingly, of the multitude of studies on Job, very few focus on economic and class fea-
tures (Newson 2003, 48, 66–67; Pelham 2012, 170–173). Of those that do, only Dawson’s
(2013) does so to any extent.

6. Ste. Croix shows a comparable situation in Greek ethics, which borrowed heavily from

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