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Economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE in light of the Covenant Code and Southern Levantine archaeology

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Author:
Ndikho Mtshiselwa[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Ndikho Mtshiselwa,
mtshivnn@unisa.ac.za

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This article explores the economic history of ancient Israel through the lens of the Hebrew Bible and Southern Levantine archaeology, with a focus on human rights, democracy, socio-economic justice and ethical behaviour. It investigates how the Covenant Code (CC) (Ex 21–23) and archaeological evidence from the 8th century BCE illuminate economic structures and moral concerns in the Kingdom of Judah and its neighbours. The article first discusses the dating of the CC and key archaeological finds from the period. It then examines material culture to reconstruct economic life in Judah and surrounding city-states. Special attention is given to legal texts addressing slavery, coerced labour, property violations, land use and the treatment of the poor and foreigners – especially in the context of the Sabbatical Year and festival laws. By analysing the intersection of biblical law and archaeological data, the study highlights how ancient discourses on justice and ethics were embedded in real socio-economic conditions. Ultimately, the article demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between biblical legal traditions and archaeological insights, offering a multidisciplinary approach to understanding economic justice and ethical conduct in the ancient Southern Levant.

Contribution: This article demonstrates interdisciplinary engagement between biblical studies, archaeology, social theory and economic history, thereby underscoring its relevance across multiple academic fields. It integrates textual analysis with material culture to bridge the gap between ancient legal traditions and socio-economic realities. By doing so, it fosters dialogue between humanities and social sciences, contributing to contemporary discussions on justice, ethics and human rights in historical contexts.

Keywords: 8th century BCE; Judah; Covenant Code; economic history of ancient Israel; ethics and biblical law; human rights and social justice; Southern Levantine archaeology.

Introduction

The recent scholarly resurgence of interest in the 8th century BCE Southern Levant – both in biblical and archaeological fields – has created an opportunity to re-examine this period afresh. Until recently, scholars often argued that knowledge of Old Testament customs and traditions was derived exclusively from the Hebrew Bible (Dever 1990:119–186; cf. Ackermann 1992; Thompson 1992, 1999:155, 158–161). With regard to the textual evidence in historical reconstruction, Dever contends that biblical texts were composed long after the events they purport to describe and were written by and for the intelligentsia – those who preserved, transmitted and ultimately edited the texts into their final forms (Dever 1990:119–186). Consequently, biblical texts 'may, for example, reveal very little about the actual religion (and economic realities) of the masses and tell us very little about conditions' in historical contexts such as the 8th century BCE Southern Levant (Le Roux 2012:566). Biblical textual evidence therefore bears limitations in the construction of history. In addition, drawing on the Southern Levantine archaeology may assist in the construction of the economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE. According to Le Roux (2012:567), 'archaeology does not confirm everything that happened in biblical texts, nor does it validate how it happened'. While archaeology aims to 'illuminate ancient Israelite religious practice in its material and sociological setting' (Dever 1990:127; cf. Zevit 2001), it also provides insight into broader cultural contexts. For instance, archaeological discoveries have 'resurrected the long-lost world of Canaanite history and culture – especially the spectacular find of the 14th to 13th centuries BCE library', which offers crucial knowledge of Canaanite material culture (Dever 1990:127; cf. Le Roux 2012:566–567; Pardee 2002). There is increasing recognition among biblical scholars, historians

and archaeologists of the value of collaboration between biblical exegesis and archaeological research. As Le Roux (2012:567) affirms, biblical archaeology seeks to 'explore material remains in order to determine the circumstances of ancient cultures and civilisations in a region marked by extraordinary historical complexity'. Thus, archaeological studies can make a positive contribution to the interpretation of ancient texts and the construction of a more nuanced account of the economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE. Nevertheless, since archaeological evidence alone is insufficient to present a complete picture of the region's economic history, a sustained interaction between Southern Levantine archaeology and biblical texts is necessary.

The methodological approach of this study uses diachronic analysis of the Covenant Code (CC) and archaeological data from key sites such as Lachish to reconstruct the economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE. Often in Old Testament scholarship, a diachronic approach is cast as an analysis that stands to oppose the synchronic analysis. While the synchronic studies focus on texts at a specific point in time without considering their historical development with a specific focus on analysing 'snapshots', the diachronic examines texts by focusing on their historical developments. Drawing on De Saussure ([1916] 1955), who initially espoused the autonomy of the synchronic perspective and its centrality to the speaker Barr (1995) asserted that 'exegesis, it is now widely felt, should treat the text synchronically and largely leave aside historical matters'. However, he maintains that diachronic considerations shed light on the synchronic and as such the two are inextricably intertwined to one another (Barr 1995:7; cf. Groenewald 2005:61). In addition, De Saussure's (1959) assertion that 'one cannot completely avoid a diachronic decision' when relating sources to the 8th century BCE underscores a central methodological issue in biblical historiography. As Groenewald (2005:61) points out, 'synchronic analysis without diachronic input seems to touch only the textual surface'. Biblical texts are not time-neutral records; rather, they are literary products shaped by long processes of transmission, redaction and ideological framing. Scholars such as Schmid (2012) and Römer (2016) emphasise that law codes in the Hebrew Bible, including the CC (Ex 20:22–23:33), are not 'snapshots' of social reality but literary constructions reflecting the values, theologies and political interests of various historical periods. The CC is often situated within early monarchic or even pre-monarchic strata, but its final form likely underwent significant redaction during the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, particularly under Deuteronomistic and priestly influence.

The article investigates whether both the diachronic analysis of the CC and archaeological data from key sites in the Southern Levant, when read in conversation, would illuminate the historical economic landscape of the 8th century BCE Southern Levant. Most importantly, would they illuminate a landscape that likely shaped the scribal responses found in the CC, particularly regarding ethical concerns surrounding the socio-economic experiences of Judeans in the southern region?

Southern Levantine archaeology and the economy history of 8th century BCE

Cross-disciplinary approaches have increasingly been employed to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel, particularly from an archaeological perspective. Relying on scientific methods that contemporary archaeologists use to gain more information from excavations, this study draws on the radiocarbon studies, zoo archaeological studies, paleo-climatological studies and ethnoarchaeological studies. The study, therefore, brings some of the newest techniques of archaeological research in an intersectional manner to shed more light on the economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE. Although I am interested in the socio-economic interlink of the Kingdom of Judah with the Kingdom of Israel, the Phoenician states, the Philistine city states, the Kingdom of Edom and the Kingdom of Moab, it is not my intention to detail the differentiation of their economies. It is, however, worth noting that the economy of Israel is often characterised as a clan-based system operating through patron–client networks, whereas Judah's economy and its immediate neighbours exhibit features which are more consistent with a centralised state system (Frevel 2019:372–374). While the political situation of the emerging Judah and its dependency on Israel is well researched by conceptions such as vassalage, secondogeniture and brother-dominance, the economic developments of Judah and their interlink with Israel in the 8th century BCE are under researched nowadays. Although the political dynamics of Judah – especially its dependency on Israel and concepts such as vassalage, second-born inheritance and brotherly dominance – have been well studied, the economic development of Judah and its interconnections with Israel in the 8th century BCE remain relatively under-researched. The only issue discussed at length is Kuntillet Ajrud as a joint venture of Israel and Judah.

Archaeological evidence from settlements in Judah and associated human activity in the Judean landscape indicates a significant role for olive oil and wine production. Notably, from the Iron Age IIB period onwards, northern cultural traits – including olive oil installations, burial customs and certain pottery types – appear in Judah (Finkelstein 2013:155). Dietrich (2007:248) suggests these northern artefacts migrated southward, possibly during the late 8th century BCE (cf. Finkelstein 2013:155). Although contributions from northern Israel as well as the Phoenicians and Philistines to Judah's economy exist, they appear limited in scale.

The topographical framework of CC – which references locations such as the wilderness of Sinai (Ex 19:1–2), Rephidim (Ex 19:2) and territorial boundaries extending from the Red Sea to the Philistine coast and from the wilderness to the Euphrates (Ex 23:31) – provides a geographical lens for this study. The Code's frequent allusions to livestock, agriculture and viniculture support a focus on selected Southern Levantine regions, specifically the

Shephelah, the Judean Hill Country, the Jerusalem hinterland and the Negeb Highlands. Figure 1 provides a visual image of the places associated with CC and the Southern Levantine archaeology of the 8th century BCE.

Shephelah region

Archaeological findings in the areas of Beth-Shemesh (closer to the Jerusalem region), Khirbet (Kh.) Summeily, Lachish and Tel Beit Mirsim are here categorically discussed in terms of hints at livestock, agriculture and viniculture. Although Tel Miqne-Ekron was in the Philistine region, it had an association with the Shephelah.

Livestock

Khirbet Summeily: Khirbet Summeily (arguably identified as Zenan) is a small village site located 4 km west of Tell el-Hesi in the border region between Judah and Philistia (Hardin, Rollston & Blakely 2012:29–30, 34). As Blakely and Hardin (2018:254–255) noted, approximately 1.5 km from north west of Hesis at Khirbet Summeily, despite 100% sifting of all soils and flotation samples of all loci, which may be dated to the early 8th century BCE, the absence of charred seeds is evident in the archaeological records (cf. Jeje 2024:57).

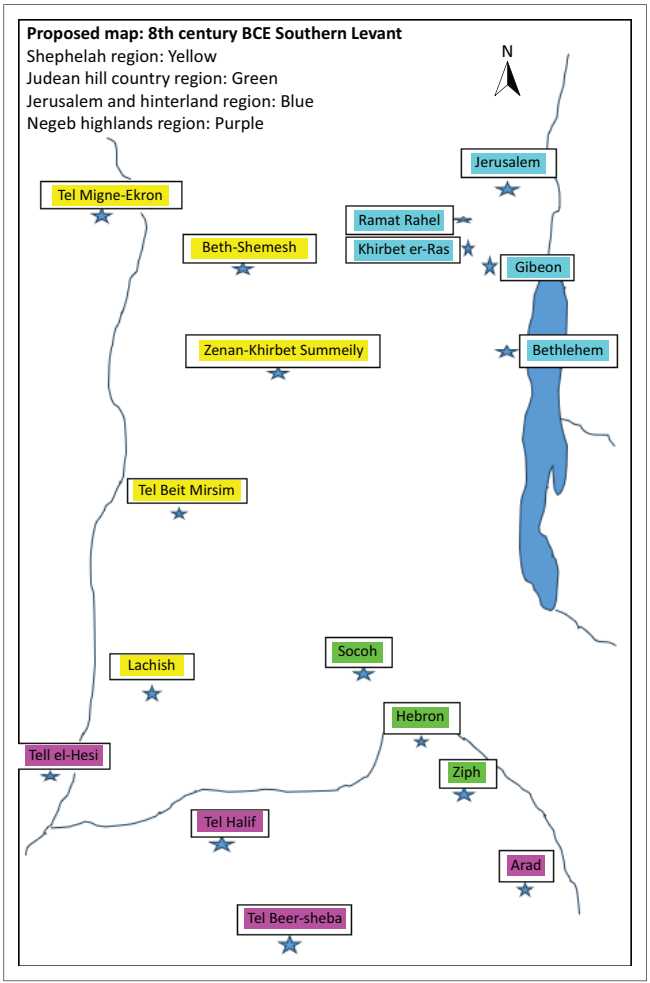

FIGURE 1: Southern Levant during the 8th century BCE related to Covenant Code.

The researchers also found that if Tell el-Hesi served as a chariot centre on the Gaza–Hebron road, it would have exercised control over a substantial area of Judah. While plenty of ash is found in one structure at Khirbet Summeily, replete with several tabuns or tannurs and a large fire pit, they are puzzled by the absence of seeds and are also unclear about what was burnt in the pit, 'since one would expect some seeds to survive the threshing process along with the chaff and straw' (Blakely & Hardin 2018:254). It is therefore hard to arrive at a conclusive argument on the processing of grain in the vicinity. However, based on their archaeological perspective, Blakely and Hardin (2018:255) carefully conclude that the mounded fortresses in the Hesi region (Tell el-Hesi, Tell Sheqef and Tell Kuneitirah) [and Tel Halif] were maintained by a regional polity (Judah) and served to control the border region between Judah and Philistia. Jeje (2024:57) supports the suggestion that:

> Beyond protecting Judah's southwest border, we suggest the forts protected a pasturage around Hesi that was exploited by Judah primarily for sheep and goats, rather than as an agricultural hinterland during the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. (cf. Blakely & Hardin 2018:255)

In addition, 'Over 20 000 acres of land providing feed on the stalk would have been a valuable commodity to control and it would have required protection' (Blakely & Hardin 2018:255). Joshua 15:37–41 supports the latter point. It thus becomes clear that archaeological records in the vicinity of Khirbet Summeily point to livestock farming and economic activities associated with livestock. Collection methods employed in the excavations conducted in June–July 2011 at Khirbet Summeily, which included the use of a $^{1}/_{4}$ inch mesh screen on surfaces, debris and pits, ensured retrieval of the remains of small-bodied species (Hardin et al. 2012:33). These findings strongly indicate that livestock farming was a central economic activity near Khirbet Summeily. As Hardin et al. (2012) remarked:

> The periods of occupation uncovered thus far, dating to the eleventh–8th centuries BCE., all produced zooarchaeological remains, most of which belong to the more easily exposable and stratigraphically higher levels of the 8th and 9th centuries BCE. (p. 33)

Hardin et al. (2012:33) further observed that the occupation layers identified, spanning the 7–8th centuries BCE, consistently produced zooarchaeological remains, with the majority coming from the more accessible and stratigraphically higher 8th and 9th centuries BCE levels. In addition, not only were the archaeological finds of domestic species, namely, sheep, goats and cattle, but 'their economic significance is emphasised by the fact that evidence for meal preparation is limited exclusively to these three species' (Hardin et al. 2012:33).

Agriculture

Beth-Shemesh: Beth-Shemesh is located north of Lachish, southwest of Jerusalem and southeast of Ekron, within the Shephelah region. In Stratum III, dated to the early 8th

century BCE, numerous storage vessels were uncovered, particularly in Area E. These included dozens of holemouth jars accompanied by many scoops, a few LMLK jars and some *pithoi* (Katz & Faust 2011:175–184). Although the architectural context remains unclear, it is likely that these vessels were part of a storage facility associated with a royal or state-administered storage system (Katz & Faust 2011:176). Katz and Faust suggest that these vessels were connected to the olive oil industry in Judah. Evidence has been discovered in the vicinity of Beth-Shemesh. Supporting this view, Momigliano (1996:139–170) notes that holemouth jars used in olive oil installations were unearthed in late 8th century BCE levels, both in earlier excavations and in more recent ones. This aligns with Katz and Faust's interpretation. Additional support comes from Bunimovitz and Lederman (2000:255) and Greenhut (2006:160). Moreover, 'the site of Beth Shemesh has produced a total of 18 olive oil installations in Level 2, which excavators date to the Iron IIB (8th century)' (Bunimovitz & Lederman 2009:137). Interestingly, rather than being located in centralised industrial areas, the beam presses – weighted by perforated stones – were found within domestic settings (Welch 2015:37).

Welch (2015:47) offers a compelling interpretation of the archaeological findings related to olive oil production at Beth-Shemesh. There is no doubt that olive oil production is attested in the site's archaeological record during the 8th century BCE. Importantly, 'Judah's 8th century production of olive oil does not seem to have been centrally controlled. Beth-Shemesh appears to be a small cottage industry built in residential areas' (Welch 2015:47). Furthermore, 'the distribution of the presses in domestic contexts suggests that control of production rested more with the people owning the presses, rather than with any single institution' (Welch 2015:47). This domestic model of olive oil production, as opposed to a centralised industrial system, aligns with the observation that 'during the 8th century, the highest concentration of presses can be found in the hills of Samaria' (Welch 2015:47). In addition, the idea that 'the northern sites produced oil until Israel's demise in 722 and their southern counterparts were in operation until 701' (Welch 2015:47) is convincing. 'At that time, a new centre of production emerged concentrated on the western end of the Sorek, at Batash and, most prominently, at Tel Miqne-Ekron' (Welch 2015:47). Given Beth-Shemesh's geographic location and its proximity to major cities like Jerusalem and Ekron (along with its satellite, Batash) and considering the time frame under review – the 8th century BCE – it is reasonable to view Beth-Shemesh as a site of non-industrial, localised olive oil production. However, it is essential to note that the means of production – such as arable land, presses and vats – as well as market access for trading the product, were likely owned or controlled by individuals residing in larger urban centres beyond Beth-Shemesh itself.

Tel Beit Mirsim: Before turning to Lachish, which lies south of Tel Beit Mirsim, it is necessary to consider the latter site because of its archaeological and economic parallels with Beth-Shemesh. Excavations at Tel Beit Mirsim yielded seven stone-carved installations identified as 'dye vats' by Albright (1943:56–57), which have subsequently been interpreted by Dalman (1964:77–78) and Eitam (1979:152) as olive oil production installations – namely, olive presses (see also Welch 2015:36). Albright (1943:46) describes the round vats discovered at the site as measuring between 0.7 m and 0.9 m in height and diameter. The internal basins were 'roughly spherical' and ranged from 0.30 m to 0.45 m in diameter, with mouths 'one-half to two-thirds' the width of the basin. In addition to these vats, Albright (1943:56) found the presence of stone and mortar basins situated in front of the vats in rooms SE 32A–2 and SE 32A–3. These features are significant when considered alongside the findings from Beth-Shemesh, where olive presses 'were not concentrated in any meaningful way as to indicate centralised production; rather, their contexts were primarily domestic in nature' (Welch 2015:47). This domestic context may similarly apply to Tel Beit Mirsim, where the presence of multiple installations within localised architectural spaces could suggest small scale, household-based olive oil production rather than large-scale industrial or state-controlled processing.

Tel Miqne-Ekron: As Finkelstein and Na'aman (2004:74) argue, the olive oil production in the vicinity of Tel Miqu-Ekron (Philistine region) was state-organised and integrated into the Assyrian regional economic system during the 8th century BCE (also see Jeje 2024:57). However, the argument does not preclude the fact that oil-related archaeological finds have also been retrieved near Beth-Shemesh and Tel Beit Mirsim, including significant discoveries at Ekron. In addition, archaeological discoveries point to the 'olive oil production and trade at the administrative centre of Shechem and the major trade hub of Megiddo in Israel' (Jeje 2024:57: also see ed. Gitin 1995:61–79, 1997:77–103; Wright 2018:3).

Of particular importance is the observation by Bunimovitz and Lederman (2011:47), who note: 'The Judahite olive oil production could have never reached the scope of the highly specialised, tremendous Philistine oil industry that flourished at Ekron', especially during the 7th century BCE (also see Gitin 1997:84). This contrast is notable because, in the 8th century BCE, the oil industry in Judah was still embedded within the social structure of its peasant communities in the Shephelah (Jeje 2024:57). Thus, 'the Judahite rural settlements in this region were encouraged to join the organised olive oil production initiated by the state' (Bunimovitz & Lederman 2011:47). Accordingly, as Jeje (2024:57) argues, it is reasonable to infer that the establishment of the centralised state system by transforming the clan-based economic model likely occurred in Judah during the 8th century BCE. That the Shephelah is hardly a naturally ideal region for olive orchards supports the notion that the expansion of the Judahite oil industry was a state-driven initiative, coordinated with Assyrian economic interests to enhance regional production. As reported by Finkelstein, Gadot and Langgut (2021:10), 'an unprecedentedly large olive oil facility dated to the Late Iron Age was identified at Tel Miqne–Ekron, also in the western Shephelah'. They further assert that 'the Judahite olive

orchards of the time must have sent their yields to be pressed both locally and in the central facility at Tel Miqne-Ekron' (Finkelstein et al. 2021:10).

Lehmann's (2003:117–162, 2008:39–94) reconstruction of the economic activity in the Kingdom of Judah from the 10th to the 8th centuries BCE is noteworthy. The interactions between the Phoenicians, Philistines and Judah offer a valuable perspective on Judah's evolving economy during this period. According to Lehmann (2003:157–158), while the Kingdom of Israel prospered economically – benefiting from robust trade with Phoenicia and the Philistine city-states – the Kingdom of Judah was, by contrast, in a comparatively weaker position. He observes that 'there was nothing in Judah, with its limited soils for grain growing and lacking surplus, that matched the scale and expanse of the Philistine economy'. Lehmann therefore supports the idea of trade relations between Philistia and Judah, with Tel Miqne-Ekron central in the trade.

Judean Hill Country region

Unlike the Shephelah region, which was dominated by livestock and agriculture, the Judean Hill Country region exhibits evidence of viniculture, specifically in the vicinities of Hebron, Ziph and Socoh, as well as in the broader Hill Country of Ephraim.

Viniculture

Hill Country of Ephraim: The vinedressers employed by the king (Uzziah and earlier, David and his descendants) point to the presence of viniculture in the southern portion of the Southern Levant, particularly in the hill country. As Rainey (1982) observes:

> [*A*] recognition that Uzziah's realm included both the Hill Country of Judah (originally centered on Bethlehem) and a portion of the Hill Country of Ephraim [*in which the tribe of Benjamin was located, 1 Sm 1:1*]. (p. 58)

supports this association. In 2 Samuel 2:4, the Judean Hill Country and the Negeb hills south of Hebron came under David's control by local invitation. It remains unclear, however, how the royal family acquired these vineyards. Yet, it is also plausible that 'the royal family may have inherited vineyards through David's wives, for example, Ahinoam the Jezreelite and Abigail, widow of Nabal from Carmel' (2 Sm 3:2–5) (Rainey 1982:59). In addition, Rainey (1982:59) argues that 'such acquisitions may have been made in Benjamin through Michal, daughter of Saul' (1 Sm 18:20–25; 2 Sm 3:13–16). The idea of inheritance is particularly persuasive in the case of Bethlehem, David's hometown. The continued tradition of viticulture in that vicinity is attested by the Deir Cremisan winery (166 X 126), located approximately 4 km northwest of Bethlehem (Rainey 1982:59; Vilnay 1977:3862).

Archaeological finds in the Hill Country of Ephraim therefore point to the ownership of vineyards by royal elites. Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that the winery market was largely controlled by political elites. Although the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Ki 21), which reflects the Omride period in the 9th century BCE, depicts elite encroachment on vineyard ownership, the possibility of ordinary Judeans owning vineyards in the 8th century BCE should not be dismissed. The administration and control of the winery economy rested with the upper classes, while the poor and middle classes likely functioned as labourers or slaves in these royal vineyards.

Hebron, Ziph and Socoh: Towns such as Hebron, Ziph and Socoh, featured on the lmlk (Lamelek) seal impressions, may indicate the existence of royal wineries in the Hill Country (Stern 1975:51). Hebron's location in the Judean Hill Country is firmly established (Rainey 1982:59). Although some scholars question whether the Ziph mentioned in the lmlk seals refers to the Hill Country town (Jos 15:55; 2 Chr 11:8; Tell Zif, 162 X 098), others locate it in the Negeb based on Joshua 15:24, identifying it with Kh. ez-Zeifeh (148 X 047) (Abel 1938:490; Vilnay 1974:2060). Nevertheless, 'the reference to Ziph as one of the four toponyms in the lmlk seal impressions hints at the possibility of a royal estate south of Hebron' (Finkelstein et al. 2021:9). As Kochavi (ed. 1972:21, 77) and later Rainey (1982:59) suggested, Socoh – possibly located in the southern Hill Country – is identified with Kh. Shuweikeh (150 X 090), based on Joshua 15:48 and 1 Chronicles 4:18. Another site, mmft (mmit or mmAt), located in the Judean districts north of Hebron, seems to have functioned as a collection centre for royal vineyards potentially inherited from the house of Jesse (Cross 1969:21; Rainey 1982:59). While Aharoni (1980:398–399) proposed that the lmlk sites represent a reorganisation of Judah's administrative districts under Hezekiah in preparation for Sennacherib's campaign, Rainey (1982:59) contends that the seal impressions more plausibly reflect viniculture practices in the Hill Country specifically, rather than the entire kingdom.

Jerusalem and hinterland region

This section focuses on the vicinities of Jerusalem, including Ramat Rahel, Khirbet er-Ras, Manahat Hill and Gibeon – towns associated with the Jerusalem and Hinterland Region.

Agriculture

Khirbet er-Ras: Vessels uncovered at Khirbet er-Ras point to olive oil production in Judah during the 8th century BCE. The site is situated on the southern slope of Manahat Hill, southwest of Jerusalem. Archaeological excavations in this area revealed agricultural installations adjacent to farmstead buildings, which were used to process grain and produce oil (Čapek & Lipschits 2019; Feig 2000:398–399; Gadot 2015:3–26; Gibson & Edelstein 1985:140; Katz & Faust 2011:181). Katz and Faust (2011:181) observe that 'dozens of holemouth jars were uncovered in a private structure at Khirbet er-Ras, which was a farmstead in the agricultural periphery of Jerusalem'. A similar assemblage of storage vessels was found at Moza, a site believed to have functioned as a royal

estate. While storage jars discovered at Lachish – interpreted as oil vessels – highlight state-regulated olive oil production under the centralised economy of Judah in the 8th century BCE, the situation at Khirbet er-Ras appears markedly different. The association of the storage vessels with a private structure suggests that olive oil production at Khirbet er-Ras was likely conducted within a non-centralised, domestic economic framework. Furthermore, in his analysis of 8th century BCE economic indicators, Hopkins (1983:177–202) includes oil presses in the Samaria hills, the lmlk storage jars, the industrial olive oil facilities at Ekron, viticulture at Gibeon and the well-preserved farm at Khirbet er-Ras as supporting evidence.

Ramat Raḥel: The Iron Age estate-farm system associated with Ramat Raḥel is characterised by 'the systematic exploitation of geographically defined zones of cultivation' (Welch 2015:47). This exploitation was carried out under the authority of a central administrative power based at Ramat Raḥel, which consolidated surrounding lands, provided protection and oversaw agricultural production and distribution. This authority was also responsible for collecting, certifying and distributing agricultural surplus. The massive palatial compound perched atop the hill overlooking the Sorek and Repha'im valleys visually embodied this authority. As Welch (2015:47) describes, 'The ashlar masonry, carved balustrades and capitals and elaborate landscaping project a royal power'. This level of refinement, along with the ostentatious display of water resources, reflects conspicuous consumption – a visible signal of centralised power and wealth. In the valleys themselves, royal power was reinforced through a network of large tumuli situated on ridge tops, offering panoramic visibility and control throughout the region. Welch (2015:47) further notes that 'in both valleys, the standardisation and technological uniformity of the agricultural installations – such as silos, presses and vats – speaks to the power of the central authority to organise production'. The presence of royal symbols and insignia, including those on storage jars and the recently discovered volute capital at the spring of Walejeh ('Ain Joweizeh), served as visible reminders to labourers that their work was integrated into a broader royal enterprise (Welch 2015:47). At Ramat Raḥel itself, a palatial compound functioned as the primary seat of administrative power, while major agricultural activities such as collection and processing occurred at task-specific satellite sites, including Motza and Rogem Gannim, which were strategically located within their respective valleys (Welch 2015:47). An unprecedented number of stamped jar handles were recovered from Ramat Raḥel, while smaller quantities of stamped handles were found at satellite administrative centres. These stamped handles provide compelling evidence that Motza and Rogem Gannim played roles in the centralised collection and processing of agricultural goods, as well as their distribution. Ultimately, the central authority at Ramat Raḥel oversaw the generation, collection and redistribution of surplus within a tightly controlled and symbolically charged administrative system (Welch 2015:47). While some of this activity was already observable in the 8th century BCE, the system reached its peak in the valleys west of Jerusalem in the final third of the 7th century BCE (Welch 2015:47).

Viniculture

Jerusalem: From an archaeological standpoint, Geva (2003:183–208) provides compelling evidence for urban growth in the Kingdom of Judah during the 8th century BCE. He notes that urban life became increasingly attractive, especially in the southern region and in Jerusalem. As Geva (2003:204) observed, 'with the growth in area (Jerusalem), the agricultural hinterland of the city expanded as well' with new plots of land made arable in terraces built on the hill slopes and scores of small farms established. Geva's analysis demonstrates the dynamic interplay between urban expansion, agricultural development and political stability during the 8th century BCE. It suggests that Judah, although not economically dominant in earlier centuries, experienced substantial growth in both population and infrastructure – especially in and around Jerusalem. This period of transformation aligns with the archaeological record of large-scale construction, administrative centralisation and increased storage capacity – often interpreted as responses to internal reforms and external pressures, such as Assyrian expansion. As such, the 8th century BCE emerges as a pivotal phase in Judah's economic history, warranting further exploration through both material and textual sources. The economic growth in Judah during the 8th century BCE was, in part, a result of increased population density in the Judean highlands. This demographic shift was significantly influenced by the arrival of refugees from the Kingdom of Israel and the Shephelah region of Judah during the Assyrian military campaigns (Geva 2003:204–205; cf. Broshi 1974:21–26; Finkelstein 2013:154). However, this proposed transformation of Judah's economy remains a subject of scholarly debate – particularly concerning the scale and impact of refugee resettlement. The arrival and integration of displaced populations continue to divide archaeological and biblical scholars. Nonetheless, one cannot overlook the earlier impact of regional instability, especially the campaign of the Aramean king Hazael in the late 9th century BCE, which some scholars view as a precursor to Assyrian influence in the region (Chadwick & Maeir 2018:48–54; Kleiman 2017:354–371; Moyal & Faust 2015:283–293). This broader geopolitical context contributed to shifts in power, population and ultimately economic organisation in Judah. Regarding the economic growth remarks on the Jerusalem's viniculture are thus in order.

Not only was Ramat Raḥel associated with the Repha'im Valley, but Jerusalem itself was closely linked to the valley, which, by the 8th century BCE – and especially by the 7th century BCE – had emerged as Jerusalem's wine country (Greenberg & Cinamon 2011:79–106). As Welch (2015:57–61) explains, the Repha'im Valley begins west of Jerusalem's Old City and runs approximately 10 km southwest, where its river merges with the Sorek River. This valley hosted not only the palatial compound of Ramat Raḥel but also its

westernmost site, Rogem Gannim, a large tumulus that anchored much of the region's agricultural activity during the 8th to 4th centuries BCE (Welch 2015:57–61). The south-facing slopes of the Repha'im Valley are covered in thin terra rossa soil, making them especially suitable for viticulture (Greenberg & Cinamon 2006:235). Welch (2015) reports that,

> [*S*]urveys and excavations have revealed 35 wine presses distributed among five sites in the Repha'im … At Rogem Gannim, where eight presses were identified, the treading floors are of comparable size, ranging from 3 × 3 m to 3 × 4.6 m. (pp. 57–61)

Additionally, the discoveries in the sites included rock-cut basins and cisterns related to wine production and storage.

These wine presses match the emerging typology for Late Iron Age installations, particularly those discovered at Beit Safafa, where four presses were dated through ceramic remains. In total, 35 wine presses in the Repha'im are confidently dated to Iron IIB. A unique feature of this wine operation is the construction of tumuli along the valley's bordering hills, symbolising elite control and oversight. The fact that the Repha'im Valley functioned as Jerusalem's wine-producing hinterland suggests that economic elites and oligarchs based in Jerusalem controlled both the productive vineyards and wine manufacturing. As a result, the labour force likely consisted of poor Judeans, middle-class workers and slaves, who worked under elite supervision.

Khirbet er-Ras: While Khirbet er-Ras is often associated with olive oil production, archaeological evidence also attests to wine production on-site. Excavations by Yuval Gadot revealed two wine presses dated to the 8th century BCE, directly connected to Iron Age structures (Finkelstein et al. 2021:7). One notable example is Wine Press I, which features a curved niche in its back wall. It shares a wall with Building II, suggesting that they were constructed together as part of a coordinated facility (Finkelstein et al. 2021:6). These connections reinforce the view that both presses were integrated with Late Iron Age domestic or production buildings. In addition, an assemblage of at least 23 holemouth jars was found in a room just east of the wine presses, providing further evidence for wine production at the site (Freud 2018, Plate 79). As Finkelstein et al. (2021:7) note, the jars – conclusively dated to Iron IIC – 'were probably used to store wine produced at the site'. Together, these findings confirm that Khirbet er-Ras was not only part of Judah's agricultural periphery but also a site of significant wine production under local elite or administrative oversight in the 8th century BCE.

Negeb highlands region

Worthy of consideration in this region is Tel Beer-sheba. Although Tell el-Hesi is in the vicinity of Philistia, the Tell may be discussed in the present section because of its relations with cities in the Negeb region.

Agriculture

Tel Beer-sheba: Zoo-archaeological data provide significant insight into the 8th century BCE economy of the southern Levant, particularly with respect to livestock farming (Sasson 2008:113–134). According to Jeje (2024:55) 'livestock during this period was exploited for a range of products' – meat, milk and wool. The exploitation was hardly for the specialised production of a single commodity. As Sasson (2008:127) notes, 'taphonomic analysis and body part representation of caprine and cattle at Tel Beer-sheba, Stratum II (8th century BCE), point to a food-maximising strategy', aimed at securing dietary needs in Judah (cf. Sapir–Hen, Gadot & Finkelstein 2016:103–118). Despite the fact that Tel Beer-sheba was an urban site inhabited by elites, no evidence of selective exploitation (e.g. preference for meat-bearing body parts) was identified that would confirm on-site slaughtering of livestock (Sasson 2004:31–51, 2008:127). Additionally, 'spatial distribution analysis of body parts in Stratum II at Tel Beer-sheba showed no indications of social stratification typically associated with a market economy' (Sasson 2008:127). In the vicinity and surrounding areas of Tel Beer-sheba, sheep herding reflects a subsistence strategy aimed at balancing the demand for wool, a by-product of sheep herding, with herd security, largely provided by goats (Sasson 2008:127). Sasson (2008:127) concludes that livestock farming patterns across the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Southern Levant point to a self-sufficient economy and optimal exploitation of subsistence resources. One may thus infer that 'the wool from sheep became a tradable commodity, likely generating income for elite urbanite Judeans, although zooarchaeological data do not indicate who actually owned the livestock' (Jeje 2024:55).

Tell el-Hesi and Tel Halif: Meanwhile, other areas near Tel Beer-sheba, such as Tell el-Hesi and Tel Halif, traditionally viewed as agricultural settlements, have recently drawn renewed scholarly attention. Blakely and Hardin (2018:236), expecting to identify an agricultural community, instead found an administrative site from the 10th century BCE, which had been abandoned in the 9th century BCE and an agrarian countryside that appeared 'almost devoid of farmsteads, hamlets and villages' in the 8th century BCE. To resolve this apparent anomaly, they turned to paleoclimatological data. Interdisciplinary studies – incorporating geology, geography and climatology – suggest that Tell el-Hesi and Tel Halif were likely centres for shepherding and a pastoral lifestyle, supported by fortified structures built to defend Judah's southwestern border against Philistia during the 9th and 8th centuries BCE (Wright 2018:6–7). Rejecting Finkelstein's (1996:225–242) assessment that the southern coastal plain and Shephelah reflected a fully developed Philistine settlement system, Blakely and Hardin (2018:236) stress their finding that towns, villages and hamlets appear to be absent around Tell el-Hesi – a pattern that, in their view, remains largely unrecognised in current scholarship.

The Covenant Code and the Southern Levantine economy of the 8th century BCE

Based on the dating of CC discussed shortly, as well as on the hints at the socio-economic and ethical aspects reflected in CC and on the clues about historical realities that are founded on archaeological studies, an investigation of the impact of biblical texts on ethical issues against the background of a renewed economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE is worthwhile. The possible socio-economic and ethical presuppositions reflected in the laws of CC include: slavery and coerced labour (Ex 21:2–11); animal theft, crop destruction, deposit and burglary (Ex 21:35–22:8); livestock, grazing land and agricultural products (Ex 22:1–15); the poor, slaves and foreign labourers (Ex 23:10–13); and the use of agricultural produce crops (Ex 23:14–19). These presuppositions point to the exploitive economic system, ethical considerations in the economic matters, economic inequality and production of economic goods as well as to the use of agricultural products.

Scholars, such as Loewenstamm (1977), Levinson (2006) and Westbrook (ed. 2003), have emphasised that biblical law codes are not administrative documents, but didactic and ideological texts, often presenting idealised versions of social order. Covenant Code reflects an agrarian, kinship-based society, with laws on property, debt, labour and social justice. For Levinson (2006:30), 'The Covenant Code is less a civic law code than a theological charter – a vision of just social relations articulated in narrative form'. That said, certain features of the CC – such as the laws on release of debt (Ex 22:24–26) or gleaning rights for the poor (Ex 23:10–11) – may reflect socio-economic tensions that were exacerbated during periods of state centralisation and imperial extraction, such as the Assyrian period.

Dating the Covenant Code

Because of its intertextual and conceptual relationships with the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (VTE), the Laws of Hammurabi, Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and the Deuteronomic Code (D), the CC is often dated to 8th century BCE. The prevailing scholarly view that Deuteronomy is dependent on CC supports the claim that Deuteronomy appropriated and revised CC's laws for a different historical and theological context (Gertz 2019:187–194; Levinson 1997; ed. Otto 1996:112–122; Otto 2004:273–277, 2015:71; Stackert 2007). This essay adopts that position, particularly in light of the close correspondence between Deuteronomy 15:12–18 and Exodus 21:2–11. However, notable differences exist between CC and D. As Wright (2019:181) observes, whereas CC (Ex 21:2–6) prescribes that the ritual for converting a debt slave into a permanent slave be conducted at the sanctuary, Deuteronomy relocates this act to the owner's home. Furthermore, Deuteronomy grounds manumission in Israel's historical experience of divine liberation from Egypt (Dt 15:15), a theological rationale not emphasised in CC (Zahn 2016:495). D also modifies the sabbatical laws of Exodus 23:10–11. While CC advocates for the release of agricultural produce for the poor in the seventh year, D reinterprets this as a release from debt, while still preserving a modified version of CC's provision for gleaning (Wright 2019:182; cf. Wells 2019:207–210). Wright further argues that Deuteronomy emphasised specific themes already present in CC – especially apodictic laws dealing with the cult, the poor and justice (e.g. Ex 22:20–26; 23:1–12) – but reframed them to promote a more comprehensive ethical vision suited to the late monarchic context (Wright 2019:182). Some scholars, such as Van Seters (2003), have proposed the reverse: that the CC was a post-Deuteronomic creation by an exilic Yahwist author who drew on Deuteronomy and the Holiness Code. However, this theory has been challenged – most notably by Levinson (2004:272–352) – on several grounds. One major weakness lies in attributing to the Yahwist the authorship of the casuistic laws in Exodus 21:1–22:16, which find no counterpart in Deuteronomy. Moreover, the claim that the reception of the Laws of Hammurabi occurred in the exilic period lacks sufficient support. Wright (2009) convincingly argues that this influence is better situated within the Neo-Assyrian period, specifically between 740BCE and 640BCE.

Wright (2019:185) further contends that 'CC and its narrative may be seen as setting the stage for D's more explicit and extended use of Neo-Assyrian treaty and loyalty oaths'. Given that D's engagement with the VTE offers a relatively firm anchor for dating core Deuteronomic laws to the latter half of the 7th century BCE, placing CC in the early 7th or even the late 8th century BCE is plausible. Römer (2016:369) similarly argues that if D was intended as a revision of CC, then CC likely predates it by several decades. In this context, the 8th century date for the CC becomes increasingly likely, particularly considering that the reception of the Laws of Hammurabi – closely aligned with the legal content of CC – occurred during the Assyrian imperial period. Moreover, CC's concluding section (Ex 23:20–33) exhibits motifs derived from Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, such as divine presence, conquest and protection of territory – often known as the 'vanguard motif' – and presents an ideological and theological legitimisation of the preceding laws (Wright 2016:48–49, 2019:183–184). Given that these Neo-Assyrian influences are best dated to the 8th or early 7th century BCE, it is reasonable to situate the composition of the CC towards the latter part of the 8th century BCE. In this light, the socio-economic and ethical themes embedded in CC likely reflect real historical conditions in late 8th century Judah. The Code thus represents the scribal and theological response of pre-priestly authors and later redactors to the challenges of economic disparity, legal instability and shifting social structures under Assyrian dominance.

Assyrian imperialism and the 'Age of Empires' framework

Lipschits (2021) reflects an important shift in scholarly thinking: the increasing recognition of imperial dynamics – especially Assyrian policy and presence – as key drivers of

economic development in the Southern Levant. Lipschits argues that Judah's economic centralisation, administrative expansion and even some of its legal discourse (e.g. land tenure, taxation) must be understood as reactions to Assyrian hegemony. After the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722BCE and especially following the Sennacherib campaign in 701BCE, Judah transformed itself into a vassal polity with stronger centralised control over agricultural production. As Lipschits (2021:29) observed, 'Judah's ability to survive and adapt under Assyrian rule was rooted in economic reform and administrative intensification, reflected archaeologically in storage systems, standardised weights and administrative seals'. One may pose the question: Could it be that Judah's economy in the late 8th century cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be placed within the imperial network of extraction, tribute and survival? In addition, does the Assyrian imperialism add any nuance to the reading of CC, which may reflect ideals of justice and redistribution in tension with the exploitative realities of empire? Because the Assyrian empire and its imperialism was prominent in the 8th century BCE, it is likely that its contribution, in part, to the exploitative economic system, ethical realities, economic inequality and social injustice issues may have prompted an ethical response in the CC, such as legislation concerning the poor.

Exploitive economic system

The Southern Levantine archaeological discoveries pointed to the ownership of means of production, such as agricultural land and vineyards as well as to the ownership of farms, wineries and storage facilities together with the control of economic trade by the royal families and the Judean elites. One may be curious about the place of people who worked for them. An allusion to male Hebrew slaves in Exodus 21:2, when set against the background of the economic history of the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE, presupposes that the economically privileged Judahites used the services of the slaves to attain their economic viability. Because the villagers were less vulnerable to wars as compared to their urbanite counterparts, Knight (2000) observes that:

> [*P*]assing armies could easily commandeer agricultural resources and compel villagers to join them as slaves or soldiers, and because a village could scarcely offer resistance there would be little reason to attack and destroy it. (p. 169)

In addition, as Knight (2000:174–175) observes, slavery may have been induced by 'capture, birth and hardship' as well as because of falling into debt and having 'no other recourse than to sell themselves into slavery'. For him, the text of Exodus 21:2–11, 20–21, 26–27, 32; 23:12 must have arisen in a context and situation 'where slavery was an institution that could to some extent be regulated' (Knight 2000:175).

Some of the slaves often had their roots in the villages and served within the exploitive economic system that was controlled by the elite urbanites. Economic activities carried out by the slaves often comprised of farming (shepherding and working in the crop fields), production of agricultural products such as olive oil (in the Shephelah region), wine (in the Judean Hill Country region), grain (in the Shephelah, Jerusalem and hinterland as well as in the Negeb highlands regions) and wool (in the Shephelah region), and transportation of products to the trade routes and markets likely by donkeys and foot. The verb 'serves', which is employed in Exodus 21:2, instead of 'work' presupposes the absence of monetary compensation or as remuneration for the work carried out. In addition, that the noun 'slaves' is utilised instead of 'workers' rules out the idea of employment in favour of that of working without compensation. It therefore comes as no surprise that Markl (2019:46–47) observes the depiction of both slaves and servants in CC. In addition, given the absence of reference to monetary compensation and/as remuneration for the work carried out, the idea of an exploitive economic system holds.

The issue of labour resurfaces in Exodus 23:10–13. Verse 10 states that 'plant and harvest your crops for six years …' the statement presupposes that the productive land was worked by the owner. However, verse 12 casts a different idea. The instruction for the 'slaves' and 'foreigners' to rest and be refreshed on the seventh day also suggests that the landowners who often resided in the urban areas used the less economically privileged persons to enrich their livelihoods. Interestingly, the instruction also presupposes a situation where the slaves and foreigners were overworked with no rest, prior to the composition of Exodus 23:10. Additionally, allusion to the oppression of foreigners mirrors the situation of exploitation. It was not unusual and abnormal for foreign nationals to shepherd the flock of the elites in Judah. As Blakely and Hardin (2018) observed, various Neo-Assyrian letters:

> [*S*]how direct imperial control of pasture, sheep, and other grazing animals in a system covering the empire that extends down from the king, to governors, to commanders of cohorts, to members of cohorts, and finally the individual shepherds. (p. 256)

In this case, 'Grazing locations, permission to travel, and even routes taken to the capital were directed from the King's Court, which probably included a Chief Shepherd' (Blakely & Hardin 2018:256).

The foreigners were also integrated to the exploitive economic system of Judah. Furthermore, Exodus 22:21 and 23:9 reflect the objection on the mistreatment and oppression of foreign nationals, likely from the neighbouring nations and city states. The reason for the mistreatment is not explicitly mentioned in these texts. None the less, the texts served to sort healthy relations between Israel, Judah, Phoenicia, Philistia, Edom and Moab that would in turn be crucial for economic trading and the growth of the Judahite economy. No doubt, the slaves, foreigners and servants were coerced to work to satisfy the needs of those in the city (Knight 2000:170). It is likely that Exodus 22:21 and 23:9 reflect a concern about the exploitive economic system that in my view caricatures an unethical behaviour on the part of the wealthy urbanites in Judah during the 8th century BCE.

Ethical considerations in the economic matters

The archaeological records in the Shephelah region, specifically in the vicinity of Khirbet Summeily, which point to livestock farming lends an interest in economic aspects of livestock trading that are not revealed by the Southern Levantine archaeology. Not only does Exodus 22:1 hint at the trading of livestock but also underscore an unethical element, which is trading stolen cattle and sheep. It is also succinctly clear that some wealthy individuals acquired livestock through unethical conduct. Furthermore, v. 3 exhibits the consequence of burglary. Interestingly, the text suggests that in a case where the burglar is unable to pay for the stolen household goods, he may be sold as a slave to pay for his theft (Ex 22:3). Poverty therefore led to slavery and subsequently to exploitive economy.

Covenant Code also protects the agricultural land, which serves as a primary means of livelihood in the villages, and a key resource for the economic well-being of the urbanites (Knight 2000:176). The text of Exodus 22:5–6 is set to avoid the destruction of the grazing land and vineyards mostly owned by the wealthy elite urbanites, officials linked to the rulers, military officials and less by the ordinary Judean citizens (who mostly resided in the villages). In addition, suffice to say, the protection of agricultural land translates to the protection of the economy of Judah. No doubt, verse 5 guards against any possible destruction of the agricultural economy that could negatively affect food security.

Exodus 22:7–8, 10–13 reflects the protection of money and livestock in the process of deposits made for safekeeping. The text exhibits liability for property held for another person in both village and urban contexts. 'When animals are the property in question, the village is the most likely setting', and if the 'property belongs in fact to a large landowner who has lent it to a tenant farmer, then these laws betray less a village ethos than a class division' (Knight 2000:177). Because it is difficult to rule out the possibility of villagers owning some livestock (though probably in a small scale), the provisions of Exodus 22:7–13 on livestock, therefore, serve the interests of both the urbanites and villagers. Furthermore, the text presupposes a state of economic prosperity and/as well-being where some Judahites could save money. In contrast to saving money, the point that some Judahites considered safekeeping of livestock may have been caused by little or no means to agricultural infrastructure, namely, a farmstead and agricultural tools. It is also probable that unfavourable climate and/as environmental condition persuaded some farmers to keep their livestock elsewhere, sensibly in another village close to a city. Despite these probabilities, certainly the texts insinuate economic viability and prosperity among the Judahites both from the urban areas and villages in the Southern Levant of the 8th century BCE.

Economic inequality and social injustice

The ownership and the control of the means of production and trading of economic goods, as shown by the Southern Levantine archaeology, lends inquisitiveness on economic inequality and social injustice as the elites and the poor Judeans as well as the clan–based economic model with patron–client networks and the centralised state system existed along one another. The distinction between the slaves and the apparent non-slaves in Exodus 21:18–21 is striking. These verses are concerned about physical violence against men. However, noteworthy is the point that a reference to 'lost wage' (Ex 21:19) presupposes a situation where a labourer is compensated and/as remunerated for the services provided. By contrast, vv. 20–21 allude to the slaves and are silent about the issue of their remuneration. It may therefore be deduced that while some humans were economically exploited in the form of hard labour and not given remuneration, others were compensated for the services they provided to the wealthy elites.

Although the concerns of Exodus 22:14–15 are about the compensation for the injured or dead livestock, which was borrowed, the text also bears implications of economic inequality. For social and economic survival, some Judahites had to borrow livestock. This could have been for the purpose of acquiring milk, wool and ploughing the fields with cattle. The issue of the differentiated economic status, where some Judahites owned means of production and economic survival, while some barely owned means, is here glaring. Furthermore, verse 15 reveals that some Judahites could rent the livestock, most likely with money, while some were subjected to poverty and slavery.

Exodus 22:21–27 reflects the protection of the vulnerable strangers, widows, orphans and the poor, who constituted the vulnerability of the village residents. Noteworthy is Knight's (2000:177–178) discernment and Markl's (2019:58) observation of the theological and rhetorical statements in CC, but not of enforceable laws. The so-called laws may best be explained as a clause of ethical sensitivity. As Knight (2000:178) observes, 'moneylending and the taking of collateral point to the presence of wealthier persons, such as were to be found in cities or large estates'. However, as Knight (2000:178) succinctly notes that, 'the interests of villagers who were exposed to such oppression and exploitation are discernible in these laws'. The persons (or neighbours) who fall short in the provision could have been exploited, hence the existence of Exodus 22:25–27.

On the issue of poverty, brief remarks are warranted. On the seventh day, when ordinary work stops in the fields and the agricultural land is left uncultivated, the poor Judahites were permitted to harvest some crops from the field and glean from the vineyards as well as from the olive groves (Ex 23:10–11). Although the latter appears to be a caring gesture, one wonders whether it was sufficient, and whether it elevated the poor from poverty. I doubt. Nonetheless, the implications derived from this text are of economic inequality and the point that the economic system in Judah was not very helpful to the poor. For instance, not only does Exodus 23:6 acknowledge a class of poor people, it also points to a stratified society with a law from an urban group of scribes that, for Knight (2000:177), sought 'to use an agricultural

practice as a means of offering relief to the poor, even though villagers as a whole were often not far from the poverty level themselves'. In addition, Exodus 23:10–11 is reflective of the subsistence economy in Judea to which the villagers were subjected (Knight 2000:173–174).

Conclusion

In sum, an archaeological perspective on the Southern Levant in the 8th century BCE, particularly in the Judean region, offers valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions and livelihoods of its inhabitants. The archaeological record depicts regions engaged in varied economic activities, including livestock farming, viticulture, olive oil production and the trade of agricultural goods. While the expectation was to uncover explicit ethical issues through archaeological data, such findings were limited. Consequently, this study now turns to the biblical text for further analysis. Drawing from archaeological insights, the biblical CC offers a complementary perspective on the socio-economic and ethical realities of the Southern Levant during the 8th century BCE. Key legal texts such as Exodus 21:2–11; 21:35–22:8; 22:1–15; 23:10–13; and 23:14–19 reflect a range of socio-economic dynamics, including: Slavery and coerced labour, theft, property damage and economic restitution, land use and agricultural production, class inequality and vulnerability of the poor, foreigners and slaves and use of agricultural produce for religious and economic purposes. These elements collectively speak to an exploitative economic system, inequality and ethical considerations within economic transactions.

Exodus 21:2's reference to male Hebrew slaves presupposes an economic context in which the urban elite benefited from slave labour. Villagers, although less likely to be attacked, were vulnerable to conscription or enslavement by passing armies. Slavery was not always a sign of wealth; instead, many were enslaved because of economic hardship or debt, especially in village settings. The CC's legislation concerning the treatment and release of slaves (Ex 21:2–11, 20–21, 26–27, 32; 23:12) aligns with the realities of urban regulation, suggesting that cities institutionalised slavery to some degree. Slaves, likely from rural backgrounds, were compelled into agricultural and logistical labour, producing and transporting goods such as olive oil, wine, grain and wool, often without remuneration. The use of the term 'serve' in verse 2 and the designation 'slaves' rather than 'workers' highlights this lack of compensation. The inclusion of foreigners in labour discussions (Ex 23:10–13) points to non-Israelite integration into the workforce, as seen with figures such as Doeg the Edomite (1 Sm 21:7–8). Letters from the Neo-Assyrian period (Blakely & Hardin 2018:255–256) support this view by describing the imperial control of livestock economies, including shepherd hierarchies that extended even to royal oversight. Thus, both foreign nationals and rural Israelites were embedded in a labour system that privileged urban elites, reinforcing the notion of an exploitative economy that relied on coerced labour. Texts such as Exodus 22:21 and 23:9 reflect concern for foreigners, perhaps in response to mistreatment and may signal a desire to promote diplomatic and economic ties with neighbouring regions such as Phoenicia, Edom, Moab and Philistia.

Exodus 22:1–3 points to the theft of livestock and its punitive consequences, suggesting that economic crimes could result in slavery if restitution could not be paid. This introduces a tension between poverty, property and punishment, illuminating how the economically vulnerable could become trapped in cycles of debt and servitude. Other laws, such as Exodus 22:5–6, aim to protect agricultural infrastructure, particularly the vineyards and grazing lands likely owned by wealthy elites. These laws demonstrate a concern for economic stability and food security and reinforce the idea that land ownership and production were concentrated in elite hands. The laws in Exodus 22:7–13 concerning property deposits and liability reflect both urban and rural realities. While some villagers may have owned livestock, the laws largely point to class division, as the wealthy likely possessed surplus animals and goods requiring safekeeping. Furthermore, these laws hint at economic prosperity for some, as evidenced by the safekeeping of money and livestock. At the same time, they suggest infrastructural limitations or climatic challenges for others, who may have been unable to maintain their own livestock.

Exodus 21:18–21 distinguishes between free persons and slaves in legal discourses. While injury to a free person required compensation for lost wages (v. 19), no such provision existed for injured slaves (vv. 20–21), thereby highlighting the systemic devaluation of slave labour and the absence of financial protections for the most vulnerable. Similarly, Exodus 22:14–15 underscores economic inequality: while some individuals could rent livestock for agricultural use, others had to borrow, revealing disparities in access to productive resources. Exodus 22:21–27 offers rhetorical rather than enforceable protections for widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor. These ethical exhortations reflect a village-based ethos, concerned with protecting those most likely to be exploited by urban elites or estate owners. The observation that moneylending and collateral practices appear in these laws further supports the view of a class-stratified society. Exodus 23:10–11, which allows the poor to glean from fields during fallow years, demonstrates both subsistence-level survival and the limits of elite generosity. While it appears compassionate, it likely did little to elevate the poor from poverty, especially in a system already burdened with economic inequality.

Exodus 22:9's mention of clothing likely refers to garments made from wool and animal skins, linking livestock not only to food but also to textile production and trade. Milk, although not explicitly mentioned, may also have been a valuable by-product, supporting a diverse economic network. Numerous references to fields, vineyards, grain, grapes and olive groves (Ex 22:5; 23:11) indicate intensive agricultural activity in the region. These resources contributed not only to local economies but also to international trade with Philistia, Phoenicia, Moab and Edom, as attested by both textual and archaeological sources. Exodus 23:14–17

alludes to the three annual festivals where agricultural produce and livestock were used for religious offerings. The mention of altars (Ex 20:24–26) and sacrifices suggests an established system of ritual consumption of economic goods, likely concentrated in urban cultic centres. Offerings were likely brought to centralised sanctuaries, reinforcing the interconnection between religion, economy and class.

The depiction of varied economic activities in the Southern Levantine archaeology, which is complemented with the perspectives from CC on the socio-economic and ethical realities of the Southern Levant during the 8th century BCE lends the issue of human rights. The present contribution provides a discourse on the exploitive economic system, economic inequality and social injustice as well as on the insurance of the well-being and dignity of the Judeans in the Southern Levant. The essay is further consistent with some of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, namely: (1) no poverty; (2) end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; (3) promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; (4) reduce inequality within and among countries; (5) make cities and human settlements inclusive; and (6) ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

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Ndikho Mtshiselwa: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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