

Review of Philippe Guillaume, *Land, Credit and Crisis: Agrarian Finance in the Hebrew Bible*. BibleWorld. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012.

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This is one of the most curious books that I have read for some time. It is best described as a box of items found at the back of a flea market. Picking the box up, you never know quite what you will find. It may have a few real gems; it may have some real junk. And all of them are thrown together in a way that belies any clear organisation. So let me attempt to unpick the items that delight and challenge and those that are simply wayward.

First, however, the purpose of the book: it sets out to challenge assumptions by some biblical scholars concerning economics in the Hebrew Bible. Land and its usage, the functions of debt and credit, and the nature of crisis constitute the main topics of Guillaume's text. In each case, he feels he is making a provocative proposal: that the primary concern with land was usufruct and labour, rather than any notion of private property in land; that debt kept farmers on the land (due to labour shortage) rather than remove them from it; that there was no economic crisis in the early Second Temple period. Only on the first point are there more gems than pieces of junk.

The opening discussion of land tenure is generally good, occasionally great. Guillaume debunks the idea that there was widespread private property in Second Temple Yehud. Rather loosely defining private property in the modern sense (why not say capitalist, since that is crucial?) as the right to ownership in relation to all others who do not have the same right, he shows quite convincingly that conditional possession is the norm in biblical texts. This is predicated on the basic ideological notion that the land is Yahweh's (Lev. 25:23) and that all who dwell upon and use it do so conditionally. Tenure, possession, reallocation of land by the village commune – these terms and more are part of a network of assumptions and practices that indicate property was by no means understood or treated as absolutely alienable (pp. 9-13, 17-18).

At the same time, Guillaume's choppy mode of writing misses the crucial point here: private or absolute property was an invention by the Romans in the second century BCE. All we find is a brief tip of the hat to the Romans at the end of a rambling list (p. 21), but this hardly recognises the crucial role of this distinction. For the Romans, property or *dominium* is a relation between an individual person and a thing, characterised by absolute, inalienable power of that person over that thing. This point is a commonplace in histories of jurisprudence and economics.<sup>1</sup> Crucially for our purposes, private property was quite different from possession (*possessio*): the former refers to the control of goods, while the latter entails full legal title to those goods. While possession is subject to qualification and external constraint, property refers to the unqualified and absolute legal title to something. What Guillaume is trying to say, then, is that the texts of the Hebrew Bible deal with possession, not private property.

Yet, there are enough insights in this discussion to produce some decisive contributions to the understanding of land in the Hebrew Bible. The key items here are the treatments of *'ăhuzzâ* (tenure) and *nahālâ* and *heleq hasadeh* (land shares). While the first clearly designates shifting possession and usage, and while the third speaks of strips of non-contiguous land constantly re-allocated, Guillaume leaves the second untranslated. The reason is that it designates the overlapping senses of inheritance, gift, and grant. Let me say a little more concerning each.

As for *'ăhuzzâ*, it means tenure, coming from the root *'hz*, to hold or seize. It is clearly not "property" as the lexica — i.e., Clines et al., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*; Koehler, Baum-

gartner, and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* — would have us believe. Thus, Abraham seeks to acquire some land, as a “burial tenure” (*’ăḥuzzat qeber*, Gen. 23: 4, 9, 20), from the “Hittite” clan of Ephron so that his own clan may have a place to bury their dead. There is no suggestion that the Hittites cease to be the overlords, even though the burial tenure passes on to Abraham’s sons. Similarly, Hamor’s granting of *’ăḥuzzâ* to Jacob’s sons in Gen. 34:10 permits them tenure and thereby usufruct in the land.

However, the key word (often parallel with *’ăḥuzzâ*) for inheritance is *naḥălâ*. The standard meaning given is inviolable and inalienable property.<sup>2</sup> Yet the root *nḥl* means to take possession (*qal*), allocate (*piel*), and give (*hiphil*), all with the association of inheritance (Guillaume fails to see the finer points here, suggesting that it simply means grant, bestow, present). Crucially, the emphasis is not on the type of hold but on the mode of acquisition. That is, it designates the acquisition (*qal*) of something that is allocated or given (*piel* and *hiphil*). Such an item may pass from father to son, but that is not the prime meaning of the term. All of which means that *’ăḥuzzâ* and *naḥălâ* are not synonymous: the former designates tenure, while the latter means the process of giving and acquisition.

The third term is *ḥelqat ḥasādeh*, a share of land and not, as it is so often rendered, a field or plot of land. Why not? In contrast to a field or even a farm, which is demarcated in terms of land measurement, surveying and clear demarcation from neighbours, a land share is a moveable strip or strips of land that are constantly reallocated on the basis of use and need. The means of reallocation is an authority, usually the village-commune, but it may also be a patron. Here Guillaume unwittingly recovers the Soviet-era category of the village-commune, the *mir* or *obshchina*. This was a key component of ancient Near Eastern research in the USSR, drawn from direct experience of this practice in Russia until the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Following in the footsteps of many others, Guillaume provides extensive evidence of its use in very different places, such as medieval Europe, seventeenth-century North America, pre-1873 Japan, medieval Russia, and, into the twentieth century, the Maghreb, pre-Ottoman and Ottoman times, twentieth-century Greater Syria, and Greece. But how did it work? In order to ensure soil preservation, consistent crops, risk-spreading (natural and human), and manage taxation requirements, village-communes would allocate strips of usually non-contiguous land to farmers. The strips were usually quite long but with the width of a few furrows. The key is that they were constantly reallocated. Annually or biannually all of the farmers would gather and agree to a realignment of these land shares, in light of the various needs of the village-commune. The most common method of allocating these land shares was by lot, in order to ensure that all had to work the better and worse land at some time or other. Other methods included argument (often lengthy) and agreement by the whole village commune, or by males, by elders, heads of households or clans, or a patron.

In this light, it is possible to understand the various references to “boundary marker” or “landmark” (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10; Hos. 2:5), to “the lot (*gōral*) of their *naḥălâ*” (Josh. 14:2; see also 18:2-10),<sup>4</sup> as well as to the “measuring rope” (*ḥebel*), the semantic field of which actually includes an “allotted portion” of land (Deut. 3:4, 13-14; 32:9; Amos 7:17; Micah 2:5; Zeph. 2:6-7; Zech. 1:16; 2:5; Psalm 16:6; 78:55; 105:11).<sup>5</sup> These are the means of measuring and demarcation of one strip of agricultural land from another, strips that are constantly reallocated in the village-commune. At this point we need to move beyond Guillaume, for he fails to notice how *ḥebel* draws together two of the terms mentioned earlier: *naḥălâ* and *ḥelqat ḥasādeh*. Thus, in Psalm 16:6 *ḥebel* and *naḥălâ* appear in parallelism, or rather the outcome of casting the measuring rope is a *naḥălâ*. Further, Psalms 78:55 and 105:11 both speak of a *ḥebel naḥălâ*, a “rope of a portion”. The connection may be outlined as follows: if *naḥălâ* designates the process of transition, and if *ḥelqat ḥasādeh* is the land share itself, then the rope is the means of the process by which the shares are allocated and reallocated – usually by lot (Josh. 14:2).

Having made these crucial points, Guillaume feels called upon to discuss at length the various Ottoman land categories in order to locate insights into biblical practices. This became a fashionable focus in the 1980s, with many developments since, for here at least is tangible evidence that may provide some insight. The trap with such a comparative approach is the same as the Bedouin fetish common among biblical scholars: a later group in the same area is assumed to operate in largely the same fashion as those farmers a few millennia ago. While lip service is sometimes paid to vast differences in the wider economic framework, too soon the template is applied readily to the biblical material.

The other material in Guillaume's book is less useful, although some of his points concerning the resourcefulness, rather than helplessness, of the peasant are well taken, as are some of the quirky insights into passages such as Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21), or Jeremiah's need to get to his home village to take part in the periodic allotment of land shares (Jer. 37:12). Too often are there stray speculations, loose formulations, and simple mistakes. Some Guillaume has inherited from others, such as the problematic assumption that nomads and settlers simply switch when times are bad or good. This flies in the face of weighty evidence that such a transition is made slowly and not without difficulty. Further, in the material under consideration, it is clear that so-called "settled" people were highly mobile and that "nomads" spent periods in one place.

The most systematic error of the book is an unarticulated assumption of ancient "equilibrium" theory. In its neo-classical form (Léon Walras), the theory states that when a market is left to its own devices, without "external" interference, it achieves an equilibrium in which prices reflect actual conditions. The operator within that system is the infamous *homo economicus*, who works according to purely rational calculations concerning his or her own "comparative advantage" (David Ricardo). Needless to say, in the real world, *homo economicus* would survive barely a day. Applied to ancient Israel, this becomes the symbiotic relationship between peasant and landlord, between rich and poor. They need each other, so much so that when the poor become poorer, so do the rich. In this context debt is a benign strategy, designed to help the poor peasant rather than enrich the creditor. All of which leads Guillaume both to romanticise the "small farmer" and to argue that there was no economic crisis in the land of Yehud.

Other puzzling and indeed annoying features of the book include the indiscriminate polemic. He seems unable to avoid the temptation to let loose whenever the opportunity presents itself – and even when it doesn't. Theological obscurantism, prophetic ranting, utopian dreaming, Marxist anachronism, liberation agendas, archaeological constructs – these and more are guilty for systematic misinterpretation of biblical texts. Thus they mistakenly see debt as a way of squeezing the poor, postulate imaginary crises, voice moral indignation at the antics of the rich, and seek to apply these morals to our own situation.

Finally, there is the unaccountable dismissal of archaeology, giving preference to biblical interpretation and the use of Ottoman land categories. Add to this sloppy editing and proofing, with too much variation in formatting, occasional slips, such as the reversal of Hebrew text (p. 50 – לרובג – בתלהג), and – in the bibliography – mistakes in dates, journal volumes, page numbers, spelling, and presses. The book could have been much better.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See for example Jolowicz (1952: 142-143, 426); Anderson (1974: 65-67); Patterson (1982: 31); Linklater (2000: 1432); Graeber (2011: 199-201, 205, 290).

<sup>2</sup> HALOTSE 1:687b ("inalienable, hereditary property"); DCH 5:659b ("inalienable hereditary property"). In his rather loose studies, Borowski too sees *āḥuzzā* and *nahālā* as synonyms and defines them as inherited private property within the context of the clan (Borowski 1987: 22; 2003: 26). Ferdinand E. Deist has a curious twist, noting all the terms mentioned

here, even recognizing the process of allotment, but then assuming that they become inalienable property (Deist 2000: 143-144).

<sup>3</sup> See Jankowska (1969: 233-282); D'iakonoff (1974: 519-548; 1975: 121-133).

<sup>4</sup> The common argument that this was a once and for all allotment of land (as far as the narrative is concerned) that was subsequently inalienable misses the function of the terminology (see Sweeney 2007: 249; Deist 2000: 145). By contrast, Kitz explores the implications of the allocation by lot (Kitz 2000: 601-618).

<sup>5</sup> See also Middle Assyrian Laws, B¶8 and B¶9, which deal with the penalties for encroaching on the "great boundary" and "small boundary" between lots (Roth 1997: 178-179).

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