

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

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The genre of this book is something of a puzzle. Overall, it is perhaps best described as a polemic, with a few central points to make, a welter of novel exegetical suggestions, the whole enterprise being overheated by attacks on opponents who don't agree with those central points. Guillaume is disarming enough to describe the genre of his book as "more a compote than a careful composition", perhaps more like an overheated dessert than the main meal. He suggests that he should be forgiven for his culinary peccadilloes on the grounds that scholarly details will need to be sacrificed for sake of the greater good, namely, the justice deserved by "the undernourished billion of our contemporaries" (p. 5). It appears that "social-scientific slogans" in Hebrew Bible studies are standing in the way of global justice. So should we perhaps begin this 300-page work with the thought, "Let them eat compote"? When reading Guillaume, a sense of humour is required.

In recent years, there has been something of a resurgence in the study of ancient economies, precisely because a number of critics – notably Michael Hudson – have been worried by our current global inequities, and they wonder whether a better grasp on economic history can help. Instead of engaging with these debates, and their hermeneutical significance, this book is more concerned to provide a taxonomy of ancient and Islamic concepts of communal land. In many respects, this is a worthwhile objective, but it is not the objective with which the book begins – unless the reader is perhaps to infer that the world needs to return to an agrarian system of communal land? This option, however, is quickly eliminated (p. 15).

Among the surprising omissions in Guillaume's bibliography is Karl Polanyi's landmark work, *The Great Transformation* (1957). A key thesis of this work was that ancient economies were organized around social principles of reciprocity and redistribution, rather than sustained by a network of markets relatively autonomous of their cultural context. While Polanyi's work has been repeatedly criticized for its lack of attention to the evidence for trade in the ancient world (notably Hudson and Levine 1996),¹ there can be no doubting the dramatic changes wrought by modernity's "disembedding" of the economic sphere (Taylor 2007: 159-185).

Guillaume presumes this background but chooses to frame it essentially as his denial that "private property" actually existed in Israel. It is not at all clear that this is the most fruitful way to approach the issues at hand, since the terms of the discussion would need to shift if we began by inquiring, rather, about the management of "family property" in ancient Israel and the senses in which it might have been owned under customary law. Thus, what Naomi is selling in Ruth 4:3, for example, is the usufruct of her share of village land (*heleq hasadeh*), allocated annually, not a particular field (p. 84).

The introductory discussion of land "possession" is not as clear as it might have been, since these days possession tends to imply ownership, unless, of course, one is blessed with a degree in property law. If land was not actually owned by families in ancient Israel, then scholars might be better off avoiding the word "possession" and speaking instead about various kinds of land "holding". This is becoming a more common translation of *'ăhuzzâ*,² although how this common term in the priestly tradition is to be distinguished from *nahălâ* is somewhat problematic, and leaving the latter untranslated is not much of a solution. The suggestion that *nahălâ* designates "something received or granted rather than bought or acquired" (p. 20) seems to overlook the larger

Deuteronomistic narrative contexts where the land is acquired by conquest. A satisfying analysis of both the semantics and pragmatics of these terms is much to be desired, and perhaps a topic for a future doctoral thesis. Guillaume's semantic observations on land terminology are often disappointing, but he does provide useful provocations to think more about the systems of debt and usufruct rights (the use of lands held in common) that wove people and their landholdings together.

It seems that in the ancient, non-capitalist systems of exchange, a season of bumper crops would not lead to a dramatic decline of "price", and similarly during lean years, debts would accrue at a stable rate. If debt balances could not be cleared at harvest time, then the whole system would become eventually unworkable unless declarations of debt release could be enacted from time to time. This is the wider economic context that sits behind much of the discourse of social justice in the ancient Near East, as Weinfeld (1995; cf. Houston 2008) and others have described it. Guillaume refines this picture by suggesting that the "release" in Leviticus 25 is from antichretic loans for which, instead of gaining interest, a creditor may obtain labour and the usufruct of land.³ Leviticus 25 then presents not a release from debts but the end of a loan period – on the tenth day of the seventh month in the 49th year (pp. 192-210). Whether this Jubilee release concerned only elite "brothers" is matter for further debate. On Guillaume's account, the discourse of ancestral ties to land is insignificant when compared with the need for labour markets (a set of analytical priorities ironically well adapted to an industrialized world).

Behind the discourse of imperial economies governed by benign sovereigns, and the biblical mimicry of imperial economies (Strawn 2007), lies a complex social landscape which varies between small villages and larger market towns, and between lower and higher social strata.⁴ Accordingly, the biblical imagination of economics moves between the domestic utopia's "vine and fig tree" to the counter-imperial vision that has the wealth of nations arriving in Jerusalem – as opposed to Persepolis. And in the process, intra-Israelite disputes about the legitimacy of land holding seem to have emerged. Guillaume repeatedly emphasizes the abundance of land resources and the scarcity of labour, but such factors will have been largely irrelevant to disputes about ancestral identity and legitimacy evident in biblical texts, especially in relation to the symbolic centre formed by Jerusalem (The potential irrelevance of plentiful land resources to social conflict is well illustrated by considering such issues in the context of colonial Australia).

As an Australian reader of this book, I was most interested in the suggestion that the Roman idea of *dominium* took on new connotations during the Renaissance, when it was linked with allodial land title in a polemic against feudal tenure. Rather than have the Crown own all underlying title, as in feudal and ancient imperial arrangements, allodial ownership implies that employers would need to purchase labour in a market system "rather than command the workforce to farm the landlords' demesne as an incident of tenure. Thus Roman ownership ideas were claimed as a liberating ideology favourable to capitalism and hostile to feudalism" (p.13).⁵

The great irony here is that it was actually the more conservative common law tradition (as opposed to the progressive civil law of Europe) that could conceive of a "native title" enduring even beyond the assertion of British sovereignty in colonial domains. In our peculiar mixture of colonial and feudal law, native title is seen, at the very least, as a bundle of use rights that are a burden on the Crown (Hepburn 2005). So if we were looking for an analogy with ancestral land in ancient Israel, it might well be found in the usufruct rights of native title in Australia – characteristically, the rights to hunt, fish and gather on lands and waters held in common. A difference would be that the Crown does not now demand a tax on native title (that would add insult to injury). Yet, as the biblical invocations of ancestral land law in the face of empire illustrate very well,⁶ it is still possible for indigenous people to assert their own laws against empire, or perhaps to adapt their laws in various ways to imperial interests.⁷ Whether such a complex mix of accommodation and resistance can address global inequities, however, is another question entirely.

Endnotes

- ¹ Notably in Hudson and Levine (1996; 2000).
² See Bauks (2004); Guillaume (2009).
³ See already Speiser (1960: 32).
⁴ See for example Dever (2012).
⁵ Citing Getzler (1998: 82-83).
⁶ See Davidson (2011: 55-87); Brett (2013: 243-256).
⁷ As suggested by Stavropoulou (2010).

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