



Biting the Poor

On the Difference between Credit and Debt in Ancient Israel and Southwest Asia

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Abstract

This article argues for a distinction between credit and debt, for although the two overlap, they are distinct. Thereby, the argument differs from the more common approach that sees them as coterminous, as part of the same economic function. The analysis has two parts, the first of which outlines the distinct functions of credit and debt. In the second part, they are located in their specific social and economic contexts. While credit is primarily the feature of what may be called the subsistence economic regime, based on village communities, debt functions within the system of palatine and temple estates. The argument draws on material from ancient Southwest Asia in order to understand the differences between credit and debt in ancient Israel.

Introduction

If you lend [*talweh*] my people silver, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a devouring usurer [*nošeh*]; you shall not set interest [*nešek*] on them (Exodus 22:25).

The problem of debt has been a consistent focus in biblical criticism, with close analyses of rules concerning debt, the periodic remission of debts (Jubilee), and the role of debt in cycles of poverty.¹ Further, some of the articles in the recent supplement to the *Journal of Religion and Society*, on the theme of “The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor,” consistently refer to debt as a cause of poverty in biblical texts and their economic contexts (Yee; Chaney

¹ A representative but by no means exhaustive list of references includes (Chaney 1991; Chirichigno; Frymer-Kensky; Mosala; Bergsma; Kessler: 111-12; and Schaad).

2014).² At the same time, we find a consistent thread in the Hebrew Bible that views debt with interest as a curse that should not appear at all (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 15:7-8; 23:19-20; Leviticus 25:35-37; Ezekiel 18:16; 22:12). Even more, one should not even consider offering oneself as “surety” for debt (Leviticus 25:17; 2 Kings 4:1-7; Proverbs 6:1-3; 11:5; 17:18; 22:26-27; Job 24:9; Isaiah 50:1). The implication of these texts is that we may disentangle two types of debt in the Hebrew, which for the sake of clarity should be called credit and debt. Credit functions in a reciprocal manner, offered without surety or interest on the assumption that it will be repaid. By contrast, the role of debt is to secure labor, to ensure that wealth flows to the ruling class, and to reinforce socio-economic hierarchies. To use the term “debt” for both types obscures such differences.³

In order to explicate this distinction between credit and debt, I turn to relevant material from ancient Southwest Asia (or the ancient Near East), within which ancient Israel found itself as an economically marginal zone. The reason for doing so is that the data available for ancient Israel is decidedly sparse. This is due to the practice of writing on perishable parchment rather than on more durable clay tablets. With that in mind, the following analysis has two parts, the first of which outlines the distinct functions of credit and debt. In the second part, I set them in their specific social and economic contexts. While credit is primarily the feature of what may be called the subsistence economic regime, based on village communities, debt functions within the system of palatine and temple estates.

Credit versus Debt

The difference between credit and debt may be stated simply: credit relies primarily on “trust,” whereas debt is a mechanism for securing limited labor power, for ensuring the flow of relative wealth to the lender, and for reinforcing economic hierarchies. By “trust” I mean not a moral value, but a complex pattern of reciprocal relationships within a known community. Credit is indispensable for the functioning of such overwhelmingly agricultural communities. If I need a sickle for a day, I may borrow it from the common pool or from someone within the village-commune. The unspoken assumption is that I will return it as soon as I have finished using it, since everyone knows that I have borrowed the sickle and that someone else needs it for working his or her allocated strips of land. Or the village may have three or four draft oxen, available for plowing or hauling heavy loads. In this case, the oxen are used across all the allocations of land, with groups assisting one another in order to ensure that the plowing is done. The whole community has an interest in the land being plowed, so it is unimaginable for any one person to claim an ox for him- or herself. A borrowed tool or animal, assistance with reroofing a dwelling or replastering a wall, the allocation of tasks and of grain and meat during lean seasons, the need for a good cloak in order to visit a neighboring village, the sharing of the tax burden imposed by an external and distant ruler with his armies – these and more are part of the necessary system of credit by which such communities operate. In other words, credit is a feature of the economic systems

² This collection also explores those who are poor due to socio-economic status, rather than specifically through debt (Simkins).

³ Obviously, I differ from the more common approach that sees them as coterminous, as part of the same economic function (Guillaume: 111-224; Hudson and van de Mierop).

of allocation. It ensures the mutual allocation and reallocation of all tasks and goods within the community. And it is reinforced by a complex web of social and cultural norms, fostered by clan relationships (however flexible and creative they may be), by councils of elders and headmen, and by the interweaving of the religion of everyday life. Indeed, credit is the assumption of a surprising number of biblical texts that advise credit without interest (Deuteronomy 15:7-8; Ezekiel 18:16), ban interest (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Leviticus 25:35-37), or see interest as a sign of depravity (Ezekiel 22:12) or as a punishment (Isaiah 24:2, 50:1; Job 24:9; Psalms 112:5-6).⁴ In this respect, it is not for nothing that the root meaning of the verb *nšk* is “bite.”⁵

By contrast, debt operates mainly as an extractive economic device (in contrast to the allocative patterns of credit). That is, it extracts something – goods, labor, money – from the debtor with the result that the lender’s own wealth increases. Debt does so in at least three ways.⁶ The primary role of debt in ancient Southwest Asia was as compulsion for labor, which was commonly called “debt-slavery” or “indentured labor”⁷ – in a situation in which labor is scarce and land plentiful.⁸ The one seeking to secure such labor may be the state, or a landlord who doubled as a wealthy usurer. In order to understand how debt primarily functioned to secure labor, we need to begin with a prior question: why would the state or a landlord loan anything – silver or grain were the most common – to an impoverished peasant who had little hope of repaying even the high interest, let alone the loan itself? But that is precisely the point, for the lender never expected the debtor to repay the loan, at least

⁴ Deuteronomy 24:10-13 makes no mention of interest, so seems to assume a credit relationship. The text of Nehemiah 5:3-12 is another case, for despite the apparent cancellation of debt, a rate of interest still applies. This may be seen as the limited cancellation of debts I discuss below. Texts concerning pledges include Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 24:6, 12, 20, 28; Proverbs 20:16, 22:26-27; 27:13; Job 24:3; Psalms 109:11-12; Ezekiel 18:7, 12; 33:15; Amos 2:8. And the warnings against offering oneself up, even for another, as surety, indicate resistance to the most common form of loan in ancient Southwest Asia: Leviticus 25:17; 2 Kings 4:1-7; Proverbs 6:1-3; 11:5; 17:18; 22:26-27; Job 24:9; Isaiah 50:1 (Frymer-Kensky).

⁵ The chronic imbalance in relation to sources on credit and debt means that the dominant form of credit within rural communities has barely left a trace in the records. By contrast, the debt activities of the state and its agricultural estates have left a far greater amount of records relating to their activities. From these urban Mesopotamian contexts, a significant number of loan documents, covering 2000 years, have been uncovered. The exceptions here are the southern Levant and the Seleucid period, due to the usage of perishable parchment.

⁶ I offer here an overview, although particular practices over time indicate variations on the three types of debt I specify below. For a useful survey of debt (once one disentangles his confusion between debt and credit) in ancient Southwest Asia, see van de Mieroop.

⁷ For a useful study of the relation between debt and labor in the Hebrew Bible, see Chirichigno. Knight (150) suggests that biblical laws limiting debt-slavery and indentured labor function as an idealized response, an expression of a wish that the conditions not be too harsh, as in Exodus 21:2 and Leviticus 25:3.

⁸ I cannot delve into the full argument here for the shortage of labor, but see the relevant references (Diakonoff 1982: 57-58; 1991a: 19; Liverani 1982: 251; 1989: 131-32; Michalowski: 29, 50, 75; Roth: 19, 121-23, 65, 84, 88-91, 170, 173-74, 178-83, 218, 220, 222-25, 234; Van Driel; Beckman: 12, 15, 25-26, 35, 39-40, 45, 56-57, 62, 66-67, 71, 83, 91, 98-99, 165, 178; Zaccagnini 1999: 342-43; van de Mieroop: 66, 77-79, 82, 83-84; Steinkeller 2002: 113, 119; Stolper: 327; Janković; Galil: 348-50; Knight: 140-41; Guillaume: 227-29; Garfinkle: 113).

in terms with which we are familiar. Rather, the inability to repay was structurally geared to ensure that the debtor in question would need to pay off the debt by means of labor, preferably on the same land (and thereby its usufruct) he worked before.⁹ That is, the prime purpose was to get hold of what we might call the “collateral” or “security” itself, but here the terminology fails, for it was hardly a way to provide security for the one making the loan.¹⁰ In this way, a landlord or the state seeks to ensure that the land under its control is worked by those with skills and muscle power to do so. Thus, the landlord or state functionary would have little incentive to see the debt repaid promptly, for it was in his interest for the laborer to work longer on his estates.¹¹ In this light, the practice of pledging a human being for a debt makes sense. It may be a clan member, a dependent laborer, or even oneself (in third millennium Babylon this person was unambiguously called the “hostage” or “captive”).¹²

Further, this pattern of debt-labor reveals the basic features of the spasmodic *mīšarum* (also *andurārum*) or jubilee, often at the beginning of a new despot’s reign.¹³ Misleadingly called “clean-slates” or “abolitions of debts,” they were far from it. Rarely, if ever, were they complete abolitions; instead, they were partial and selective – “debt easement” as Chaney calls them (1991). A key element of the *mīšarum* was to shift labor away from one type of dependency and back to another. As the decree of Lipit-Ishtar (1934–1924 BCE) makes clear, the *mīšarum* had the purpose of putting “them into their previous status.”¹⁴ If people had become too indebted to landlord-usurers, then they were moved back to palatine

⁹ Steinkeller tellingly observes: “Assuming that most loans were made with other objectives than the interest-generated profit in mind, it follows that, in such circumstances at least, interest was a tool and not an economic end in itself, being therefore devoid of real economic value. Its rate was largely irrelevant vis-à-vis the amount of the loan, except that it had to be sufficiently high to make it impossible for the borrower to repay the capital.” His only error is to describe these as “fictional” loans characteristic of “primitive” economies (2002: 113; see also Steinkeller 2001: 48; Finley 1981: 153-56; van de Mieroop: 66, 77-79, 82, 83-84). The common practice of using loan frameworks for what seem to us other purposes – advance payment for an item, a means for gaining control over an estate, and so on – actually illustrates this point in another way. The very structure of the loan is to ensure some type of obligation, whether for labor, delivery, or other task (Goddeeris: 388; van de Mieroop).

¹⁰ Zaccagnini warns that “antechretic” is also entirely inadequate for dealing with such loans, indeed that Roman Civil Law and English Common Law (and their derived forms today) are alien to ancient Southwest Asian (2001: 223-24, 228-29).

¹¹ Given the practice of destroying the loan document when the loan was repaid, the vast number of such documents that have survived – the highest number of economic documents as such – indicates that most of the loans in question were never repaid (Steinkeller 2002: 113-14; Zaccagnini 2002: 176).

¹² The term is *šu-du₆/dù-a*. (Steinkeller 2001: 49) A lender had the right to apprehend forcibly the person so pledged and then hold that person until the debt was worked out, as many law codes and letters indicate. As one example among many, laws 114-16 of Hammurabi’s code stipulate precisely this (Roth: 102-3; Kozyreva: 117).

¹³ The first ruler on record to have done so was Enmetena of Lagash, shortly before 2400 BCE (van de Mieroop: 71).

¹⁴ The translation here follows Renger (145), although he is too keen to misread the text as referring to a return to “free” status. Roth offers “restored order.” We may read in a similar fashion Exodus 22:21-27; Leviticus 25:8-12; Deuteronomy 15:12-18; Nehemiah 5:1-13; Jeremiah 34:13-16.

dependence; if they were too heavily tied to palace officials, their dependence was returned to the temple. So we find that the decree was often restricted to certain types of debt, especially those concerning labor, or they focused on a specific target, such as landlord-usurers, or even rapacious palace officials. The reason was that the patterns of debt-slavery tended to lock laborers into certain types of indentured labor and thereby render them unavailable for other types, especially the *corvée* that the state needed for its building projects or for peak periods such as sowing and harvest.

A further feature is that they would often offer amelioration, at least in theory: the *corvée* might be reduced to ten days a month or even to four, but this merely reflects the depth of economic crisis. In short, the jubilees were barometers of economic instability. Or, to shift the metaphor, they functioned as short-circuits to ensure the crisis-ridden system continued to survive. And they provided extraordinary occasions for political spin.¹⁵ Mesopotamian kings were consummate propagandists, who not only engaged in hyperbole, which may be read in an inverse ratio to their limited measures, but also cloaked their conquests “in the rhetoric of justice and equity” (Yoffee: 160).¹⁶ In other words, as far as the state was concerned, debt-labor was a good thing, but only in limited doses.¹⁷ Yet, given the inadequacy of the *mīšarum* and the ease with which this exploitative pattern expanded, debtors and even entire villages had myriad other means of absconding from debt requirements – leaving the fields once the crops were harvested, taking the produce with them, or not harvesting at all and disappearing out of range of the landlord’s or state’s control, abandoning villages and relocating, sowing and reaping in different places.

The second major feature of debt is to ensure that the flow of wealth runs from debtor to lender, which initially was the state and temple, but soon included landlords. This may be in the shape of labor secured by the lender, a percentage of products from the field (between one third and a half), or directly in terms of silver, and then in the first millennium, money. In this context and contrary to our assumptions concerning debt, interest on debts was clearly a secondary development, an outgrowth of the primary function of debt as a means of securing labor. While the origins of the “unnatural” idea of interest are disputed (note the Hebrew Bible’s ban on charging interest), it is worth noting that the rates had a close connection with the amount of produce demanded by the palace from its estates.¹⁸ In

¹⁵ Knight argues (218-22) that they were all spin, to curry favor with those oppressed by debt, for the ruling elite would hardly enact something so economically disadvantageous. He has in mind the rather mechanical stipulations of Exodus 21:2-6; Leviticus 25: 8-17 25-34, 40, 47-55; and Deuteronomy 15:1-3, 12-18. He also suggests that when releases were made, they tended to be annulled soon afterwards.

¹⁶ The decrees of the Isin dynasty (2017–1794), especially those of Ishme-Dagan, Lipit-Ishtar, Ur-Ninurta, and Enlil-bani, are among the best examples. They loudly proclaim that they have returned justice, joy, and even food to their subjects (Renger: 145-51; Roth: 15-17, 25-26, 33-35).

¹⁷ So law 117 in Hammurabi’s code stipulates a period of debt-bondage for no more than three years (Roth: 103).

¹⁸ In the ideal extractive world of the palace, all usufruct belonged to it, and therefore all produce was owed to it.

particular, the rate was one third for produce and one fifth for silver (Roth: 97),¹⁹ indicating both the fundamentally extractive nature of interest and its role as an extension of the agricultural practices of the estates.²⁰ Further, the rates themselves – like prices (see, e.g., Roth: 59-60, 235-36) – were set by royal decree throughout the history of Mesopotamia, although in practice they varied due to negotiation between the parties, but clearly not due to “market forces.”²¹ In light of my previous discussion of debt-slavery, we can see the dual form of ensuring wealth continued to flow to the lender. On the one hand, these interest rates were clearly unable to be paid in most circumstances, so labor would be secured. The laborer thereby worked for the benefit of the palace, temple, or landlord. On the other hand, where interest and the loan might be repaid, the lender was clearly at an advantage. It was a win-win situation for the lender.

Third, debt functions to ensure economic hierarchy. Both of the elements I have just discussed – the primary purpose of securing labor, the flow of goods and wealth – operate on the basis of and reinforce the hierarchy between landlord and peasant, between palatine or temple estate and laborer. In other words, debt is a feature of class difference and, often, class conflict. In light of all this, it is no surprise that the first demands of popular uprisings throughout history have been and remain: cancel the debts, destroy the records, reallocate the land (Graeber: 8; Finley: 80).

To sum up, credit is a feature of allocative economic forms, ensuring a system of allocation and reallocation of both the labor involved in agriculture and of the produce of the land. By contrast, debt is an extractive economic form. It is one part of the process whereby those who do not engage in productive labor extract goods from those who do

¹⁹ The amount of one third has obvious connections with the amount of produce expected from estates and tenants. However, the twenty percent for silver is most likely due not to what we would call economic forces but to the sexagesimal system in force in Mesopotamia for millennia: the Akkadian formula was “every month one shekel of silver will be added to one mina.” Given that a mina has sixty shekels, one easily arrives at, converting to decimals, twenty percent per annum (van de Mieroop: 84; Jursa: 198). By contrast, at Nuzi, the rate for interest was a staggering fifty percent. The variation here is that some loans did not attract interest unless they were not repaid on time, while others included interest from the beginning. Most were to be paid in a few months, “after the harvest,” indicating significant and widespread shortage among the rural population (Zaccagnini 2002: 179-80). For some further detail on the possible origins and early nature of sexagesimal systems in Uruk, see Englund: 32-37.

²⁰ While Steinkeller’s proposal (1981) is attractive, it misses the close connection with estates and their functions. He suggests that the initial idea of interest was in terms of rent: a farmer uses the state’s fields or a flock for time, and thereby pays a fee at the time of harvest, shearing, or culling. Although productive loans may be seen as an extension of this initial impulse, it is worth noting that they were scarce indeed (Steinkeller 2002: 113). That is, loans were not undertaken for the purpose of generating capital or interest in and of themselves; the gain would immediately be converted into personnel and land. For instance, in the Old Assyrian colony of Kanesh, the gain from its exchange in preciosities was turned to other purposes, such as dowries, acquisition of buildings, and so forth. They were usually produced with the assistance of the state and groups of landlords-merchants-usurers, each of whom then were paid (or not if the shipment was lost) when the venture was over. The same can be said of the Hellenistic world (Finley 1999).

²¹ It may be twenty percent for the life of the loan, or there may be additional rates, usually with the factors not stipulated (Kozyreva: 104; van de Mieroop: 84-85; Jursa: 198-200).

engage in such labor. That is, through debt the ruling class and their hangers-on extract labor and produce in a way that reinforces the class hierarchy of ancient Southwest Asia.

Village-Commune Versus Palatine Estates

In the preceding discussion, I have unavoidably slipped into discussions of the contexts of credit and debt, distinguishing between rural communities (or, as I prefer, village-communes), where credit was the common practice, and the palatine and temple estates, where we find patterns of debt.²² So let me outline those contexts in a little more detail.

As for the village-communes, the diverse and versatile mechanisms of animal husbandry (with 2:1 ratios of sheep and goats) and crop growing are of less interest, for my purposes, than the social determination of economic life (Sasson; Hald: 44-121; Hole). That life was centered on what Soviet-era Russian scholars called the extended-family household commune or village-commune *mir* or *obshchina* (Diakonoff 1974, 1975, 1982: 35, 1991c: 34-35, 1991b: 88; Jankowska 1969, 1991: 253; Vasil'ev and Stuchevskii: 28-32; Bartlett), and what Western scholars have dubbed *musha'* farming.²³ Whatever the term, it designates a strikingly persistent approach to subsistence agriculture (largely because it has been tried and tested), one that is found in places as diverse as medieval Europe, seventeenth-century North America, pre-1873 Japan, Russia, the Maghreb, pre-Ottoman and Ottoman periods, Iraq until the revolution of 1958, and twentieth-century Greater Syria and Greece (Granott; Liverani 1975; Blum; Adams; Liverani 1983; Hopkins: 257-58; Roberts: 15-37; McNutt: 67-72, 174; Wilkinson 2003; Ault; Wilkinson 2010; Guillaume: 28-42).²⁴ But how did it work? The typical pattern was for the farmers to live in a village cluster, with a typical population of 75-150 and coterminous with the clan, although smaller settlements often had fewer than 75 (Knight: 122-23; Schloen: 155-64 differs slightly, suggesting 100-150). 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).²⁵ But those fields were not held in perpetual possession by the farmers. Instead, non-contiguous strips of land were allocated to each household for cultivation. These were social units of measurements

²² I distill this distinction from the landmark work of Igor Diakonoff, which remains superior to the economic imperialism that sees a nascent capitalism in ancient Southwest Asia, an approach of which Algaze is the most explicit and extreme example. Diakonoff first outlined his basic proposal in Russian in 1952, but the full statement in English appeared only in 1982. Other works (see bibliography) make many of the same points, albeit with noticeable developments, until the consummate statement of *The Paths of History* (1999: 21-55; see Melikishvili: 36-49). For some useful developments of this work, although with some elements that are a little wayward, see Liverani's proposals (in the bibliography). Heltzer has also provided a significant body of detailed background material (see bibliography), although he tends to lose sight of the forest for the sake of the trees.

²³ The term is drawn from pre-Ottoman and Ottoman practices, albeit usually in ignorance of the Russian work. *Musha'* was first used by Bergheim, although it was not developed until almost a century later (Adams; Seeden and Kaddour; Granott; Weulersse; Nadan 2003, 2006; Firestone; Schäbler; Wilkinson 2010: 58).

²⁴ A consistent thread of some awareness of this approach to agriculture may be found among biblical commentators, albeit with more or less specificity (Alt: 348-72; Henrey; Kohler; Neufeld: 32; Elliger; Chaney 1983: 64-65; Kaufman: 280; Lemche: 196-98; Wright: 70; Bendor: 141-60).

²⁵ Ample evidence also comes from legal documents from second millennium Arraphe, where cases involve the inevitable struggles within and between village communes (Jankowska 1969: 246-66).

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. And the means for 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.²⁶

It is not difficult to see how credit functioned in such a context, for the deeply collective nature of this type of farming meant that one had to operate in terms of mutual “trust,” in relation to labor, equipment, land allocation, and distribution of produce. This credit was of course part of the social and cultural forces that determined the economic practices of subsistence survival. Collective activity was inescapable, within the village and between villages that were 2-4 kilometers apart, for the individual was helpless in the face of natural and social disaster, needing cooperation and reciprocal aid in order to survive (Diakonoff 1974: 523; 1976: 66; Hopkins: 256). Thus, kinship, both highly flexible and embodied 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 head-man and council of elders, was also advantageous for protection and defense against raiders. We may, following Roberts (35-37), describe these three factors as the communality of assent, of economizing, and of enforcement.

The other main system of agricultural organization and production is found in the estates, which function in tension, and often in conflict, with this regime of subsistence economics. Estates were first 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.”²⁷ Soon enough they were subsumed under the power of the palace, a transition that is marked spatially by the way the temple becomes part of the royal compound, with the main entrance to the palace facing the temple’s doors. 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,

²⁶ This archaeological research shines the light on some relatively obscure biblical terminology. The relevant term here is *ḥelqat haššādeh*, which more often functions as a metaphor (Genesis 33:19-20; Ruth 4:3; 2 Samuel 14:30-31; 2 Kings 9:21, 25; Jeremiah 12:10; Amos 4:7; note also the verb *ḥlq*, “apportion” in Jeremiah 37:12). This is not, as it is so often rendered, a field or plot of land, but a movable and reallocated share of land-usage. So also is it possible to understand the various references to “boundary” or “landmark” of Deuteronomy 19:14, 27:17; Proverbs 22:28, 23:10; Job 24:2; Hosea 5:10 (contra Wright: 70; Matthews: 5; Knight; 205-6), to “the lot (*gōral*) of their *nahāla*” of Joshua 14:2 and 18:2-10 (Kitz; contra Sweeney: 249; Deist: 145), as well as to the “measuring rope” (*hebel*), the semantic field of which includes an “allotted portion” of land (Deuteronomy 3:4, 13-14, 32:9; Amos 7:17; Micah 2:5; Zephania 2:6-7; Zechariah 1:16, 2:5; Psalms 16:6, 78:55, 105:11). These are the means of measuring and demarcating strips of reallocated land-usage in relation to one another.

²⁷ “Little kingdom” is a single territorial community or collection of closely-knit communities, with security depending on natural features such as mountains, the sea, or the surrounding desert. It is preferable to the much-abused term, “city-state.” Most little kingdoms had populations of little more than 3,000-4,000, with very few places achieving truly city-like proportions (Diakonoff 1991c: 37; Liverani 1982: 250; 2005: 7).

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 (corvée, debt-labor, and so on). 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.

Debt finds its true home within this estate system, which was the main form by which the ruling class extracted produce until the first millennium BCE, although it continued well into that era in a more subservient role. Let me take the three categories of debt I outlined earlier in order to see how they functioned with regard to the estates. The first concerns the securing of labor, which is the main and primary purpose of debt. Given the chronic shortage of labor in ancient Southwest Asia, debt functioned to secure labor for estates. The state or landlords – those multi-tasking and widely hated figures – would offer loans for which the “security” was the person himself, or perhaps a member of his clan (a son or daughter was common). Given that the terms of the debt were so onerous, a person would have little hope of repaying it. Soon enough the lender would call on the person in question to supply the labor guaranteed by the loan. And the lender would be in no hurry to see the loan paid off, for he needed the labor rather than the grain or perhaps silver of the original loan returned. However, problems would arise when the common people found themselves at the confluence of multiple debt requirements. Landlords, temple leaders, and rapacious palace officials sought to secure labor from any source available. If a village-commune was no longer able to supply labor, destroyed already by onerous patterns of debt-labor, then landlords and others had no inhibitions about poaching labor from wherever they could find it – royal or temple estates, or even from other landlords. As I pointed out earlier, this is one reason for the periodic *mīšarum*, or amelioration of debt. They were often specifically targeted at debt-labor or the conditions of the corvée, seeking to return laborers to their former state of indenture.

As for the second function of debt, in which wealth flowed from debtor to lender, the standard requirements from the estates provide a stark illustration. The estates were to supply between one half and two-thirds of the produce to the temple or the palace. The remainder was deemed sufficient for the personal requirements of the estate workers. In the chronically conservative traditions of ancient Southwest Asia, these figures remain remarkably consistent. It mattered not whether the estate was directly administered by state or temple functionaries, or by landlords on tenure, or even by small farmers who had tenure from the functionary or the landlord. They had to supply the same amount, year by year. And this amount was not expressed as rent due for the use of the land, but as a loan that had been forwarded to the person in question. That is, the palace would “loan” half or two-thirds of the amount of grain, vegetables, milk, meat, or fiber to the estate in question. At the time of harvest, shearing, milking, or culling, this loan would then be repaid.

Third, this pattern of debt ensured the hierarchical class structures were reinforced. The petty despot was the ultimate source of the loans in questions, but his various functionaries, priests, and landlords maintained their own status by means of the flow of debt. By contrast, the indentured estate laborers were kept in a constant state of debt to those above them. Without that pattern of debt, they would have no sustenance whatsoever, so they were

trapped. The barest minimum that they could produce for themselves, whether from leftovers from the produce owed, or by means of their own cultivation of a few plants and husbandry of an animal or two, was better than none at all.

A question remains begging: why did the temple and palace not content themselves with taxing the village-communes instead of operating estates? The answer is quite simple: taxes on villages were set at ten percent (the tithe), but the requirements from the estates was either one half or two-thirds. Obviously, the latter option had higher debt yields. It also required less policing. That point brings me to my final consideration, which concerns the weakness of royal power and the skewed impression given by the documents that have survived. These documents are typically from royal and temple archives, as well as from the archives of some of the clans of landlords, who were also usurers, tax collectors, palace diplomats, and merchants. These documents – from the Umma and Garšana archives of Ur III through to the Persians²⁸ – speak in extensive detail of the provision of food and fodder, produce required by the ruling class, the organization of labor, tools, and rations of grain, beer, and wine.

But they also represent the monarch's power as extensive and all-pervasive. They claim that all land is the possession of the monarch (1 Kings 4:21) or of the gods (see Leviticus 25:23), and that all who live in his realm thereby hold the land under lease (Steinkeller 1999).²⁹ The reality was quite different, for without elaborate administrative apparatuses, clear borders, and the ability to police the territory claimed, the real power exercised was weak and intermittent. The further away a collection of villages was from the capital, the weaker was the power. If villages found the burdens of debt-labor, corvée 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.

Conclusion

I have argued for a distinction between credit and debt, in terms of their specific functions and their contexts. In order to clarify this distinction, I have drawn on material from ancient Southwest Asia, not only to understand debt and credit in that context, but also to understand some of the threads within the Hebrew Bible. The continual resistance to debt that we find throughout the laws and the prophetic material may be seen as an assertion of a credit system that was typical of village communities (for instance, Deuteronomy 15:8-11). We would expect to find such credit dominant in the new settlements of the Judean hill country during the long economic “crisis” at the end of the second millennium BCE. However, the problems of debt-slavery and poverty through debt also leave their marks, not least through the laws that seek to ameliorate such debt (Deuteronomy 15:1-7; 12-18), but also with signals of people seeking refuge from debt (1 Samuel 22:2). These problems arose

²⁸ The range includes Sumer (Uruk at the Eanna Temple precinct, Shuruppak, Lagash, Ur [Umma and Garšana archives]), Old Babylonia, the Middle Assyrian kingdom, Alalakh, Arraphe (and Nuzi), Hittite Anatolia, and Bronze Age Syria and Palestine (especially Ugarit).

²⁹ The same applies to the official texts of the brutal thugs who ruled, all the way from Lipit-Ishtar, through Hammurabi, to Darius. Of course, they claimed to be beneficent and kind, claiming power over vast swathes of territory.

through the efforts to impose an estate system on Israel as it became one of the little kingdoms of the first millennium.

Despite efforts of debt systems to appropriate the terminology of credit freely given (the tithe is perhaps the best example), debt and credit remained at loggerheads. During periods when the “little kingdoms” became “big kingdoms,” when the well-known empires rose, estate systems became more widespread and patterns of debt dominated. It would be a mistake, however, to follow the lead of Herodotus and assume that these are the determining features of economic, social, and cultural life in ancient Southwest Asia. Due to internal contradictions, these big kingdoms collapsed with predictable regularity. The question here must be, collapse and crisis for whom? For the petty potentates, priests, and centers of power, they were periods of crisis. But not for the majority who lived and labored in the village communities. Along with nomads and Habiru, they would exploit weaknesses in the big kingdoms, hastening their demise by whatever means possible. The reason was that they longed to reestablish their own preferred economic system of subsistence survival, which functioned by means of communal credit rather than debt. These periods were long indeed, often running into centuries from the third millennium through the grand period at the close of the second to the glorious ends of the empires in the first. No longer did the merchant-usurer-tax collector come with his band of thugs; no longer were sons and daughter dragged off for debt-labor on the estates; no longer were the razor-thin surpluses, kept in store for the lean time that would inevitably come, expropriated; no longer did they need to uproot, to join the Habiru and to escape rapacious rulers and their debt regimes; and no longer was debt a dreary feature of life. Instead, credit ruled. Much of the Hebrew Bible’s stipulations suggest that this was the preferred mode of life for ancient Israel as well.

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