

Ze'ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, Routledge, London and New York 2014, 500 pages, 104 figures.

The book entitled *The Economy of Roman Palestine* was first time published in 1994 and it brought the prize Yad Ben-Zvi for the author.

Chronologically the research was focusing on the Land of Israel during the Roman period, from the destruction of the second Temple (70 AD) until the middle of the 4th century AD.

The most important sources of the present work consist of Talmudic texts, the scholar trying to restore their value as historical sources. He emphasizes the unique character of this literature, given by the fact that it emerged mostly in a rural community, in opposition to the Roman literary sources, which reflect the experience of the aristocracy, those people associated with the imperial and urban establishment. The rabbinic sources are the only literary sources from the Roman period (excepting some Egyptian papyri) which refer to the native population of a land, and were very lightly influenced by the imperial culture and by the religion. This fact has a particular importance in enlarging our perspectives on the economical activities in the rural areas of other frontier provinces, as Roman Dacia.

However, the author accepts that some non-rabbinic Jewish sources (Flavius Josephus, Philon, evangelists of the New Testament, Qumran texts) can offer some help in reconstructing the economy of the Roman Palestine, but this kind of sources does not have such an importance in the research. The most important aspect of the book is that this corroborates different types of sources. Archaeological evidences and inscriptions have been integrated in the research, sources that prove the economic reality depicted by the Talmudic sources. For instance, synagogue inscriptions reveal the custom described in the rabbinic literature. The author emphasizes that the rabbinic literature does not present a uniform stereotypical picture about the power and influence of the rabbis in the society, fact that increases the credibility of these sources.

The structure of the book is clear and easy to follow. A List of the figures used in the book, followed by Acknowledgements and Abbreviations, were set up at the beginning of the work. The introduction represents a review of the main questions arising from the topic, sketching methods and perspectives followed in the research. The main questions raised from the subject were organized in six main chapters, which were divided in several well pointed out topics.

1. Settlement patterns. Classification of settlements; The polis; The town; The village; The villa; Spatial structure.

The author established three types of settlements in the Roman Palestine: the polis (*kerakh*), the town, the village and the villa.

The chapter dedicated to the polis (*kerakh*) makes a review of the evolution of Palestinian cities from the Hellenistic to the early Arab period based on the geo-political criteria. The author pointed out that from the geographic point of view there are three general characteristics of urbanization: (1) the foundation of new cities; (2) the

growth of existing cities; (3) a selection process. He agrees with the importance of the road networks (natural cities), but political criteria must have also a great importance in the rapid urbanization (artificial cities). This point of view can be divided into three basic categories: coastal cities (Greek colonies), cities belonging to the mountain regions (eg. *Samaria* – the future *Sebaste*, Jerusalem) and cities of the inner plan (e.g. *Geba*, *Pegai*).

The author establishes the characteristics of the Palestinian cities: large population, institutional structure, and control over the neighboring region, architecture, social stratification, larger than the rural settlement, sources of employment, local mercantile center, and Hellenistic population. The most important official person in the economic sphere was the *agoranomos* (*astinomos*), mentioned quite often in the Talmudic literature. He was in charge of caring for the supply of goods for the city, of setting prices, of certifying weights and measures, of checking the quality of produces and of supervising the activity of market places.

The towns in the Roman Palestine, called *ʾyr* in Hebrew and *krtʾ* in Aramaic, represented a continuation of the Israelite and Hellenistic period settlements. Until the *Bar-Kochba* revolt the population was entirely Jewish, therefore most of the Talmudic literature was acquainted in those towns. Regarding the extension of a town Safrai's opinion is that any settlement less than 100–120 males of military age can be considered a village (100–250 families), while a large town can host more than 1000 small families. Large archaeological excavations undertaken in several towns (Capernaum, Um Rihan) reveal data about the external form of a town. The basic building in the property of a family is the “courtyard” including residential and non-residential rooms and an open courtyard. They were often built very close to the others and the more external courtyards seemed to form a wall.

Usually the Romans granted a large autonomy for the Jewish towns, excepting occasional periods of political or religious oppressions. The community was lead by the council of “seven town elders” which controlled the finances of the town. The local town assembly elected the institution of the three “archons” led by a mayor. Unlike the *poleis* the residents of Jewish villages could be elected regardless of social and economic position. It is an important aspect that the towns supported the entire infrastructure of the education of the children. The elementary level was obligatory and the more advanced level of education took place at the synagogue or even in separate school buildings. This education system expresses the unique nature of the ancient Jewish society, creating an educated and enlightened workforce.

The Talmudic sources state that the Jewish towns had a well-organized infrastructure (construction of roads, inns and cisterns, lighting of public buildings and of dark streets, bathhouses and lavatories, the service of a doctor etc.).

The village distinguishes from the town in two main aspects. The village had no municipal institutions and no services; however there are some cases which indicate a certain degree of communal services (building of roads to satellite villages in the vicinity of village Thulth, Samaria). The village was dependent of the towns in terms of trade and commerce (market days and large seasonal markets in the town). The traveling salesman (*rochel*) represented the most important commercial link between the town and the village. He is acting in those areas, where was no economic justification

for the establishment of a permanent store. The *rochel* dealt especially with expensive merchandise, such as perfumes and spices, selling mostly for women. The sources indicate that he traveled on foot only with a small box.

The owner of a *villa* was usually a rich man who lived mostly in the polis and had usually non-Jewish origins, connected to the Hellenistic culture. The farmstead was of great importance in the economic life of a region. The owners used the latest innovations in technology and in planning the agricultural strategy. Many of the *villas* had aqueducts, drainage system, bridges and roads and other installations used to increase the agricultural potential. There were, however, Jewish estate owners such as Rabbi Judah, the Prince who received estate from the emperor. The author makes an extensive review of the existing *villas* in the different regions of Palestine (Lod, Judaea, Galilee) based on Talmudic and Christian sources, as well as on archaeological excavations.

Regarding the spatial structure, the scholar pointed out that the Roman Province of Judaea was characterized by a variation of different geographical, historical and ethnical make-up. Pagan, Samaritan and Jewish settlements were often located quite close to each other. In this chapter, Safrai presents a descriptive model of a regional structure in the village sphere (see Figure 31), which consists of a central *polis* surrounded by suburbs, agricultural territory, several townships, offshoot settlements and villas, connected by roads with other regions. The structure is modular and totals the geographic, historical and ethnic factors of each region.

2. Modes of production. Agriculture; Crafts and industry; Services; Appendix: grain consumption in the Jewish farmstead system.

The author widely discusses the relationship between the agriculture in Judaea and the economy in general. The approach is based on statistics, calculation of costs and profit depending on the consumption and the dining customs of the period. He concludes that the agriculture of the ancient Palestine was self-sufficient, but occasionally the imported products can be taken into account, such as spices or wheat, in the time of droughts or during the Sabbatical Year.

The most important and profitable agricultural products were wheat, olives (for oil), grape (for wine), flax, dates and balsam. The last one is a luxury perfume plant which made Palestine famous in the whole Roman Empire. The only region within the Empire in which the balsam was cultivated was the Jordan Valley, which made the groves expensive.

Fishing and grazing were of great importance in the economy of the Roman Palestine. Fish was considered part of the Sabbath meal, therefore was a widespread industry in the coastal settlements, but fish were grown in special pools or in fishpond attached to reach villas. Regarding the grazing, the author pointed out that in Palestine the majority of sheep were grown for wool and milk. Even if the *halachah* forbade the raising of the sheep in the Land of Israel, this activity was largely practiced in areas bordering the desert (Judean desert, southern part of the mount Hebron). Further, Safrai discuss extensively a large variation of agricultural products, as well as their ads to the economical system: the raising of doves, fowls, peasant, the produce of honey, salt supply etc.

In the chapter dedicated to crafts and industry, the various categories of labor were grouped in the context of their economical application. 1. Farm produce labors; 2. Export industry; 3. Local industry; 4. Services.

The basic farm produces such as flour, oil and vine imply specific technical installations such as mill, olive and vine press which can be studied thanks to the archaeological investigations.

The industries producing for import were widely discussed too in the book. The textile industry was depending on raising and flax growing. Safrai mentions several cases which prove that the workers and factories were organized in “guilds”, in Roman Palestine, too. The scholar pointed out that one of the most important quarries of sand was situated in the Acco Valley, and provided the raw material for the production of glass in Sidon. Many Talmudic sources refer to glassmakers in Palestine, to their utensils and to the type of vessels produced. Furnaces had been excavated in Beth Shearim. Regarding the industry of pottery, it is remarkable that the Talmudic sources mention over 120 different types of pottery. Even if Palestine seems to be self-sufficient in its basic pottery, the archeological remains prove that luxury pottery vessels were imported especially from east (Cyprus and Syria), but some came from Italy, too. According to Safrai, the most important question the future researches should answer to is the numerical relationship between the importee wares and the local ones. Other types of industries, such as the metal industry, the papyrus industry, the mat or the stone industry had been of secondary importance in the economy of Roman Palestine.

It is clear that the Jewish towns, but sometimes also small villages, were self-sufficient regarding the provision and services for the residents. Talmudic sources mention many types of artisans, which mean that the farmer did not have to undertake all labors by himself, but that he was supported by the service system of the settlement (bakers, slaughters, carpenters etc.).

3. Trade in Land of Israel in the Roman period. Trade in Land of Israel in the Roman period during the Second Temple period; Local trade in the rural settlement; Regional commerce; Regional markets and fairs; The nature of regional trade; Inter-regional and international trade; The transportation system; Trade arrangements; Means of payment; Customs; The economic utopia of Rabbinic thought; The ethnic background of merchants; Appendix 1: the wheat trade; Appendix 2: trade during the Sabbatical Year.

The following chapter examines the structure of the trade during the Roman period. This is one of the most extensive and complex part of the book. The local trade in the rural settlement was undertaken by farmers, who were selling their surplus products on the market. Every town had at least one store which was possible to rent or to hire. Sometimes the stores were doubled with a restaurant where processed food had been served. In a small town the merchant or a shopkeeper could act as a money-changer. A large-scale merchant, called *tagar*, acted especially in wheat trade.

A village settlement needed a trade-network in order to be able to market the surplus and buy produces for their necessities. The road network could show a spider model or a net model, the last one being predominant in the Roman Palestine. The major inter-village and inter-regional trade was based on donkey or camel caravans.

Some Talmudic sources mention a regional market taking place on Mondays and Thursdays, however it seems that their laws (for ex. a virgin was wed on Wednesday) referred to the earlier (Hellenistic) period.

The scholar analyzes the characteristic of fairs and its religious implication, as well as the phenomenon of tax reductions or exemptions. Since the fairs in the Roman Empire were dedicated to pagan divinities (Fortuna, Tyche) the rabbis forbade having benefit from a market and the merchandise purchased there had to be destroyed. The author, through a review of fairs in the Land of Israel (*Gaza, Hamat Gader, Ascalon, Ptolemais, Tyre, Beth Gubrin, Bet Shean, Emmaus*, Fig. 53), discusses about the geographic significance, the economical, religious as well as the social gathering and amusement of this forum of trade.

The regional and inter regional trade was undertaken by a chain of professional middlemen, for transporting the produce to the market. This aspect, connected with a performed transportation system (road network, see Figures 55–66) was largely discussed in the book. The author emphasizes the importance of understanding the form of the road system (cluster analyzes) which influenced a number of issues regarding the economic structure: settlement hierarchy and the level of commercial development. The book is dealing with the means of transport, the road services (inns), and the function of the moneychangers in the society. In Safrai's view, the negative attitude of the Talmudic sources regarding the commerce don't reflect the reality, rather a rabbinic view of a closed economic system with no buying and selling of agricultural produces.

4. The organization framework of farming. Agrarian structure; The influence of the Roman army in Judaea; Taxes; The rural economic system; The structure of the farm system; The economy of the polis; The balance of the trade; The currency.

The fourth chapter is giving an overview on the different aspects of the economic structure in Roman Palestine. In the author's view, it is very important to establish the different types of landowners (imperial estates, private estates: urban, church, reach landowners and small farmers), while the numerical relationship between them determined not only the whole agrarian process but the social structure too.

Safrai pointed out that the taxes for supporting army represented an important inflow of capital in the provinces. The consumption of the large army is one of the most significant frameworks of the economy in this small province.

However, taxes were an important component of the gross national product, the scholar emphasizing that it is almost impossible to determine how much taxes were paid by the inhabitants of Palestine and what was the percentage of contributions in cash or in agricultural produce.

Based on crop and price calculations, as well as on the actual size of the agricultural holdings, Safrai establishes that the minimum of land necessary to support a family was around 20 dunams (20.000 square meters). On these grounds, the Jewish farm was an agricultural unit characterized by small-scale, private, intensive, highly professional and dependent on self-labor production. It is clear also that the agriculture in Israel was based on the specialization of each region (grain and grapes – Judaea, olives, flax, grazing, fishing – Galilee).

The scholar dedicated a chapter for the numismatic evidence, which has a primary importance regarding the external trade of the Roman Palestine. His approach is based on publications, as well as on direct examination of coins kept in the Eretz Israel Museum of Tel Aviv. Out of the 3000 city coins (provincial issues), 42% was from the land of Israel, 28% from Phoenicia, 8% from Transjordan, 10% from cities in Syria and 16% from Alexandria. This picture, of course, is problematical, since the collection is eclectic and new excavations could significantly change the statistics.

Based on numismatic evidence, the trade of land of Israel had two directions: trade with neighbors, trade with foreign cities – Alexandria, Antiochia etc. However, the picture offered by the examination of the city coinage cannot be complete due to the fact that these coins were minted from copper and low denominations are not totally representative of trade which was conducted to a great extent with gold and silver coins.

The book cannot give a complete picture on currencies in Roman Palestine; he is rather sketching tendencies regarding coin circulation. There were relatively few coins in the province between 70 AD to 284 AD, then the number of coins increased dramatically in the 4th century AD and clearly slowed down in the 5th century AD, that is a general tendency in the eastern part of the Empire. The theoretical debate regarding increase and decrease of currency (reflecting inflation or economic development) is only partially touched in the book, without a final solution for this topic.

5. Open or closed economy in the Land of Israel during the Roman period? The problem; Surplus production; Branches of industry; Service network; Appendix: price index of Judaea in the Roman period (methodology).

This chapter represents the key question of the study, which was answered in the entire book through the examination of all the aspects of the economic structure in its high complexity. In order to prove that the Land of Israel was a province which was part of a much larger economic system, the scholar recapitulates the arguments exposed extensively in the former chapters: the surplus production of vine and oil in the specialized regions, the import of wheat, the branches of industry with wide scope of production of linen, wool, glass etc.

6. Demographic multiplication and economic growth. Economic growth; Conclusions.

Based on archaeological survey, the Figures 102 and 103 show a clear-cut increase of settlements in Palestine in the Roman-Byzantine period, which indicates a demographic multiplication, too. The increase of settlements starting from the Roman period was explained by two parallel processes which were intertwined: economic growth and demographic multiplication. The intensification of agricultural production was possible thanks to new settlements in abandoned regions, to the establishment of satellite settlements, to intensive cultivation, to the introduction of new crops, and of new labor techniques, of hydro-technical innovations and to the development of the new area of craftsmanship (e.g. “the flax revolution”).

This work is completed with two appendixes. The Appendix 1, representing a very useful lexicon of the rabbinical literature, explains the most important terms

and concepts (Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, Torah, Rabbi etc.) sustained by different rabbinic schools (*batei midrash*) between the 1st – 4th centuries AD. The Appendix 2 contains the abbreviations used in the book for rabbinical texts.

The bibliography is divided in two parts; the first part is dedicated to the ancient sources used in the book, and the second one to the modern literature. The book is completed by an index of quoted places and subjects.

The importance of this book for the knowledge concerning ancient economy and especially Roman Palestine is indubitably. The approach of professor Ze'ev Safrai is useful not only for the historians of economy but for everybody who wishes to understand different processes in ancient history. The book exposes in a theoretical approach patterns, without giving a generalized or schematic view of the reality. The study always takes into account the relativity of the sources (literary, numismatic or archaeological ones).

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