

# Demystifying Life in the Kingdom of Judah

We spoke with Dr. Hayah Katz on the eve of the publication of her first book, *"A Land of Corn and Wine, A Land of Olive Trees and Honey"* which focuses on the Kingdom of Judah during the First Temple Period, between the 8th-7th centuries BCE. Course coordinator in the Open University's History, Philosophy and Jewish Studies Department, and specializing in archaeology in Biblical Times, Dr. Hayah Katz's sub-field of specialization is economic archaeology. In modern layman's terms, Dr. Katz is the "voice for the average guy in ancient times."



Dr. Hayah Katz is not your average archaeologist. Assuredly she does go out on archaeological digs; since 2007 students in her archaeology

course at the Open University regularly do field work at the Tel Eton archaeological site in collaboration with Bar Ilan University's Department of Archaeology. But, Dr. Katz's major interest does not just lie in ceramics, pottery and ancient mosaics. Nor, solely in the study of the ruling class and other influential players or the major cascade of events, as so many of her fellow archaeological historians.

*Where else do her archaeological interests lie?*

"I'm interested in studying how the average person fared during Biblical times, and I can do that best by creating a model of what the entire economic environment was like," Dr. Katz explains.

Her field of expertise – economic archaeology – is a relatively new one worldwide, with very few specialists in Israel. Economic archaeology is a sub-

discipline of archaeology, focusing on the study of how people control their economic resources.

"What really intrigues me," Dr. Katz says, "is not life in the palaces or among the upper class, but life of the average person. By learning more about the simple person – his struggles, aspirations, dreams and wishes – I believe we gain a deeper understanding of the whole time period."

## Giving Voice to the Average Man

In simple terms, Dr. Hayah Katz provides, what we could monicker "a voice for the little guy in ancient times."

Her book, *"A Land of Corn and Wine, A Land of Olive Trees and Honey"* details daily life during the First Temple period in the Kingdom of Judah with a focus on the 8th-7th centuries BCE.

The kingdoms, Judah and Israel, while geographically abutting each other, were distinctly independent of each other. The Kingdom of Israel was more heterogeneous, open and prosperous, and politically more influential. The Kingdom of Judah was much smaller and financially poorer, and as a

consequence its political and social ties were more constrained and limited.

Biblical literature about this time period is plentiful – the Books of Kings, as well as several of the Prophets – but there is much that is still enveloped in myth and mystery. Archaeological research is not scarce either, but material about daily life, the bread and butter existence of the 'average family' is scattered, flimsy and generally, sadly, overlooked.

Dr. Katz began her research project by first immersing herself in Biblical sources, only to be somewhat frustrated. "The subject of economics hardly appears there, simply because this was not of interest to the authors of the texts. What did interest them, however, was social justice. This is ironic," Dr. Katz adds, "because economics is the basis of social injustice. Just read some of the prophecies of Amos, who was plagued by the injustices in the Kingdom of Israel, where the differences in social strata were greater and more extreme than in the Kingdom of Judah."

However, not only Biblical authors ignored the general economy; so did the archaeologists. "From its very beginnings, archaeological research in Israel has been designated "Biblical



## Research

archaeology" where archaeologists sought mainly to find tangible remains of the historical significance of the Holy Land. As a result," Dr. Katz continues, "archaeological study of the First Temple period dealt very little with economic themes. I did find certain discoveries of economic life in the published research that I checked, but here, the researchers simply ignored the information before them, and focused on trade (local and international), the economics of the ruling class and different divisions of production. The very same areas that comprise our economic lifestyle today."

### **Public vs. Private Property**

One area that Dr. Katz's book deals with is land ownership and development. According to Biblical law, land, the source of wealth in ancient times (and often in modern times as well), was ideally designed to remain with the specific family/tribe. A family that may have been forced to relinquish their property due to financial difficulties, was, according to Biblical law, to be allowed to reclaim it every 50 years – the Jubilee year.

But, this was a utopian vision that never came to fruition. What did happen, was that as financial difficulties arose or as people emigrated, lands were forfeited to the government – in this case the royal family (like a central bank). "During this time period," Dr. Katz continues "the economy was a mixture of private and public. The private economy was based on small land owners and cottage industries, in a matter of speaking. There were some instances in which the cottage industry grew into something larger (perhaps even an IPO). The prophets

Isaiah and Hosea talk about this, but this largely came about on the backs of an individual who was in a difficult financial situation."

### **The Local Tax Collector and The Royal Family**

The fact is, as Dr. Katz explains, "the very same factors that drive the economy now, drove the economy then. There were always taxes to pay. Tax revenues were used not just to enrich the royal family, but also to cover the expenses of rule, such as salaries of government workers, soldiers (who were also paid in food products, particularly if they were traveling from one town to another) and public services – such as the construction of public buildings and defense walls, development of water sources and the paving of roads."

Residents of Judah had to pay the king a "visible tax" a fee visible to the eye (i.e. no in-kind services). Taxes were imposed on every form of production, not just agriculture, but also on animals (sheep, goats, oxen, etc.) Apparently it was a variable tax schedule – ranging from 10% to even 25%. What is also clear, is that the tax schedule was very organized. Remember, there was still no government issued currency (this did not come into being until the time of the Persians). What there was, instead, was gold and silver, which were carefully measured, and also produce (grapes, grains, etc.) and products (e.g. wine, olive oil).

Agriculture was at the core of the economic system – vastly different than today's modern Israeli society, although quite comparable to the typical Arab village. Land ownership also meant that produce was exchanged – locally and across borders – for other

goods. So, there was trade on some kind of scale within the Kingdom of Judah, but it was significantly less in comparison with the Kingdom of Israel.

### **Early Cottage Industry**

The Kingdom of Judah could more accurately be compared to early 19th century England, a "land of shopkeepers." Dr. Katz's research indicates that "there were no stores, or rather perhaps a small outdoor marketplace, and little trans-border or even major local trade. Most exchanges of goods were based on a weight system, and these exchanges probably took place in tradesmen/artisans or small property owners' homes. If they did have a stand in an open market, it was packed up and brought home at the end of the day, as indicated by the fact that weights were uncovered in peoples' homes."

What does this all mean? "If there were no real public facilities for selling or exchanging goods, and most of it was done on a small scale (no big malls) then there was less income generated and society in general, was poorer, more closed and generally less interested in, or exposed to 'outsiders.'

Residents in the Kingdom of Judah lived in a simpler society, but one that Dr. Katz, jokingly comments would have made "Adam Smith feel quite comfortable."

According to Dr. Katz, archaeology is not only about sharpening our perspective on the ancient past "it's also about looking more carefully at ourselves. The aspirations, wishes and dreams of the average resident of the Kingdom of Judah were probably not so different than our own."