Markets and Prophets: An Examination of the Silver Hypothesis*

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Abstract: We examine a hypothesis by the economic historian, Morris Silver, concerning the role of the prophets in Ancient Israel. Based on a model he developed earlier, Silver speculates that the Hebrew prophets such as Amos and Isaiah were heeded by the government, there was land reform and a movement away from international trade and specialization. The result was a weaker economy and ultimately the destruction of both Israel and Judah as independent nations. Silver utilizes a model he developed relating affluence and altruism, leading to government attempts to benefit the poor. However, the actions only weakened the economy and made the poor worse off. We examine the Hebrew Scriptures, archaeological data and the work of biblical scholars to determine whether Silver’s hypothesis can be supported or refuted. We also examine the model he used as well as other models used by biblical scholars, and argue the models are being used to create data and facts rather the let data support or refute hypotheses. Keywords: Ancient Israel; altruism; biblical prophets; social science models. JEL codes: N150, B41, P41

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The economic historian Morris Silver offers a controversial proposition concerning the role of the prophets in Ancient Israel:

The writing prophets of the eighth-seventh centuries—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel—were not poor peasants or shepherds, hermits, or eccentrics outside the mainstream of Israelite life. Instead, they were educated members of the Establishment who quite possibly had begun their careers as cultic priests of the second (or prophetic) order. They succeeded in committing the rulers of Israel and Judah to welfarist reforms. With the support of the state’s armed might they unleashed a “prophetic revolution.” The ill-conceived policies severely damaged the economy and morale.¹

That is, the governments of Israel and Judah responded to the calls of the prophets for land reform and other measures to aid the poor, and the reforms weakened the economies of the two nations, ultimately leading to Israel’s defeat by the Assyrians and Judah’s defeat by the Babylonians.

Silver’s hypothesis questions the use of the Old Testament prophets in evaluating modern societies. Following the ideas of Amos or Isaiah would harm rather than help the poor. Silver’s analysis upends the views of most Christians about the prophets. In this paper, we examine Silver’s proposition and attempt to discover whether there is evidence to support or reject the proposition. To do so, we first detail Silver’s arguments and the economic theory upon which he relies. We will examine both the biblical evidence from Kings and Chronicles and archaeological evidence to determine whether his thesis is reasonable or not. Neither the evidence from Kings and Chronicles nor from archaeology permits a strong affirmation or refutation of Silver’s hypothesis. We note that Silver relies on biblical scholars who are the most skeptical of the reliability of the Old Testament writings. We also compare the economic model used by Silver with models used by theologians or biblical scholars who discuss the materials from the prophets. We argue that both Silver and the biblical scholars misuse the models they employ to draw conclusions that are not warranted. They both use their models to claim facts that are not in evidence in either the Scriptures or the archaeological record.
Silver’s Proposition and Arguments

Silver (1983) examines the political economy of Ancient Israel. The first short section discusses the early years of Israel’s existence, but the bulk of the work involves the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, or the period of the divided kingdoms. He claims that there is considerable evidence of increased specialization of production as well as trade with neighboring countries. This increased specialization generated greater wealth in both Israel and Judah. For most of the eighth century Israel was wealthier and politically more important in the region than Judah, but Israel ceased to exist after the Assyrian invasion. Judah’s most prosperous years were in the seventh century. Silver also claims that there is no evidence for widespread wealth disparities in eighth century Israel.

An important part of Silver’s thesis comes from his 1980 book, *Affluence, Altruism, and Atrophy: The Decline of Welfare States*. In this work, Silver claims that increasing wealth in societies usually is associated with an increase in altruism, including political altruism. But, political altruism tends to become perverse, weakening the economy and the society (p. 34). Part of the reason political altruism tends to be perverse is that it is based on a taste for “doing good” even when the results may not be good. He adds, “…altruism becomes dangerous because of the range of policy options available, the kinds of options selected, and above all the massive scale and persistence with which the attempt to improve society is carried through.” (Silver, 1980, p. 35). He examined several historical examples, including Ancient Greece, Rome, and the Sung Dynasty in China. In Silver (1983), he claims that this happened in Israel and Judah also. Silver’s model that relates affluence and altruism and connects it with archaeological evidence to conclude that the prophets’ calls for economic justice were unneeded and harmful to the poor.

Based only on the Books of Kings or Chronicles, we would know very little about possible economic exploitation of people in Israel or Judah. It is in the written prophets, such as Amos, Micah and Isaiah, that we find criticisms of the economic structures and possible exploitation in the two nations. Silver argues that the prophets were not, in general, outsiders with limited status but were among the elites themselves and had influence on the government. He further argues that they persuaded the government to engage in land reform and other welfare-type actions.
which reduced the specialization that had prevailed, reduced trade, and weakened the economy.

Silver focuses on Amos because Amos is often described as an outsider—a shepherd and a tender of fruit trees from Judah but speaking to Israel. Based on the Hebrew in the Book of Amos, and the poetry and the allusions, Silver concludes that Amos was very well educated, and cites Arvid Kapelrud who said that to claim Amos was a humble herdsman would be like saying the poems of T.S. Eliot could have been written by an uneducated person. Silver also argues that the higher Israelite clergy were divided into two orders—kohen and navi—with the former term normally translated priest and the latter prophet, although the literal meaning is spokesman. This breakdown is traced back to Moses and Aaron, with Aaron being Moses’ spokesman. Silver concludes, “The prophet is an ancient figure in the Israelite cult but the prophetic books constitute evidence suggesting that with the passage of time he evolved from a relatively junior to an equal, or even senior, partner in the priestly enterprise.” (Silver, 1983, p. 175). That is, the prophets were regarded by the elites as part of the priestly system central to Israel’s worship of Yahweh.

Silver claims there were three cultural revolutions in the eighth and seventh centuries. Two of the revolutions are widely recognized—the reforms in Judah of Hezekiah and the later reforms of Josiah. Silver sees evidence of one before Hezekiah. He dates this first cultural revolution to 751 in Israel when Pekah revolted against Jeroboam II. This is based on several things. First, Silver notes that the years following Jeroboam’s death were associated with several regime changes, indicating a time of conflict. One of the sources of the conflict could have been an unpopular drive to centralize worship in Israel. Silver’s second reason is his analysis that leads him to believe that the Deuteronomistic laws were both written primarily in the northern kingdom and were first implemented there. Third, he cites evidence from Hosea that there had been cultic reform at one time in Israel and that there had been a centralization of worship in the north at Shechem. Later, a similar movement toward centralization in Jerusalem occurred in Judah. Silver also connects the call by the prophets for socioeconomic reforms as related to Deuteronomy, which incorporated the legal practices of the state.
In his concluding chapter, Silver writes:

In the end the prophets did not succeed in transforming the Israelite. Since they understood neither the man nor Israelite society, they succeeded only in making the former miserable while destroying the latter.


To reach these conclusions, Silver relies heavily on biblical scholars that believe that Kings and Chronicles are not reliable historically.

**Economic Models**

Additional information about Silver’s model relating increasing income and altruism is needed. The purpose of his 1980 book was to study “…the desire to employ public power to help one’s fellow man—that is, political altruism or ameliorative social reform.” (p. 3). He notes that between 1950 and 1970 private philanthropic payments in the United States increased more than fourfold while government social welfare expenditures increased sixfold. He argues that, “…affluent societies will desire more altruism but will also substitute political for private altruism.” (p. 31, emphasis in original).

As noted earlier, Silver examines several historical cases to illustrate his arguments. He then offers a chain of events that he believes is typical in these cases:

…affluence induces altruistic reforms; lower-class impatience with the rate of progress triggers social strife; simultaneously, the precedents set by the reforms unleash powerful demands for new reforms (“rent-seeking”) to benefit new groups (occupational, sectional, ethnic, etc.); continued deterioration of economic and political performance due to the reforms themselves and “over crowding” of government trigger further “disaggregation of interests” and new civil strife with a possible accompanying invitation to aggressive, predatory behavior by internal adventurers and by foreign states; “emergency” measures subjecting individuals to various forms of compulsion by the state
lead to further declines in output and economic efficiency; temporary compulsive measures are entrenched until they become permanent; repetition of feedbacks until equilibrium with a simple low-level economy and society that is tradition-, localistic-, and other-world oriented. (p. 93–94).

In addition to Silver’s model of altruistic behavior, he accepts basic economic associations such as specialization of labor is productive and voluntary exchange is mutually beneficial. Increased specialization leads to greater wealth for society and Silver does not argue that the greater wealth only goes to the elites. He claims the only sources available to argue that there was increased income inequality and exploitation are the written prophets, and their motives are suspect. They are part of the elites in society, and are demanding changes as described in Silver (1980).

Most theologians and biblical scholars do not accept Silver’s analysis. Premnath (2003) uses sociological and anthropological approaches to analyze the available data. He sees a process of latifundialization at work. An agrarian society originally practices localized subsistence agriculture. The subsistence type of farming involves a mixed set of crops and reliance on animals such as sheep, goats, and cattle. In years of inadequate rainfall, the animals are a kind of stored food. Further, some crops are planted at different times and have different water requirements, so there is a reduced risk of starvation. But the elites will use the government to move towards more specialized production and a cash-crop type of farming. “The change from a subsistence orientation to a market orientation is probably the best single scale for interpreting the various aspects of an economic system.” (p. 13). A pattern of land accumulation along with growth of urban centers and militarization allows the elites to extract surpluses from the peasantry. This enables the upper classes to live lives of luxury and leisure while the peasants have less basic food items to consume. Trade increases but the traded goods are those wanted by the elites. In some bad years, peasants take on debt and often end up enslaved. Premnath sees this process described by the prophets, especially Amos.

Premnath is aware of Silver’s book and challenges Silver at several places. He writes, “The basic problem in Silver’s approach is that it is not systemic.” (p. 97). Silver ignores the issue of extraction of surplus. To Premnath, agrarian societies that go from subsistence agriculture to more specialized production and trade invariably increase exploitation as the elites extract surpluses from the peasantry.
Chaney (1989) sees a similar process at work. Cheney focuses on the time of Jeroboam II’s reign in Israel (793–753) and Uzziah’s reign in Judah (792–739). Both had long reigns and faced fewer external threats during their reigns. That is, it was a period of relative weakness for Assyria, a power that had dominated the region and would again begininning about 745 with the start of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III. By the mid eighth century, Judah and Israel together controlled the region from the border of Egypt to the central Orontes Valley (Rainey and Notley, 2014, p. 219). This gave them control of lucrative trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia. The relatively long reigns and relative security gave both kings the chance to rearrange the political economy of their nations.

Cheney cites Silver’s book, referring to Silver’s summary of the political economy as maximalist. While Silver argued the increased wealth from trade and specialization benefited most people in Israel and Judah, Cheney argues it only benefited the elites. Cheney writes,

While agricultural intensification probably raised the absolute amount of edible commodities produced, there were very finite limits to that increase, and exports competed directly with peasant sustenance. For all its erudition, Silver’s “supply-side” analysis of the situation never comes to grips with these simple facts. (p. 19).

Chaney (2014) argues that the trade that took place during the times of Jeroboam II and Uzziah involved importing luxury goods, military materials, and building materials for the monumental architecture constructed in the cities. To pay for the imports, Israel and Judah exported wheat, olive oil and wine. He cites 2 Chronicles 26:10 to illustrate the royal involvement in the specialization of production, “He [Uzziah] built towers in the wilderness and hewed out many cisterns, for he had much cattle, and farmers in the foothills and on the fertile lands, for he loved the soil.” Cheney writes,

This verse suggests that herding was increased in the Negev under royal tutelage... Plowing—shorthand for the cultivation of cereal crops—was redoubled in the plain and piedmont regions best suited to grain agriculture. Perennial tree and vine cops, especially grapevines and olive orchards, were intensified in the uplands where they grew best. In each case, the economic exploitation of a given region was specialized to one or two
crops by whose production that region could contribute maximally to the export trade and to the conspicuous consumption of the urban elites. (p. 37).

Both Premnath and Cheney claim that the increased specialization of production increased the risks associated with farming to the peasants working the land. The diversified crop production that prevailed in subsistence agriculture provided a measure of risk reduction. But, the elites who controlled the economy forced the specialization, which generated greater risk and greater debt for the peasants in bad years. The debt was part of the process of consolidating land holdings as well.

Another approach shared by Premnath and Cheney is the use of Lenski (1984). Lenski finds common characteristics of agricultural societies. He writes,

One fact impresses itself on almost any observer of agrarian societies, especially on one who views them in a broadly comparative perspective. That is the fact of marked social inequality. Without exception, one finds pronounced differences in power, privilege, and honor associated with mature agrarian economies.” (p. 210, emphasis in original).

He goes on to say that the source of the inequality is the operation of the political system. To both Premnath and Cheney, Israel and Judah were mature agrarian societies so this process must have happened in Judah and Israel in the eighth and seventh centuries.

We think there is a problem with these anthropological/sociological models. These models are developed as historical regularities. That is, any society that passes into a “mature agrarian society” will see increased social stratification and exploitation. Such “laws of history” are too broad and all-encompassing. This is also true of Silver’s model of altruism. A model that fits one place or time does not necessarily indicate that other similar places will develop in the same way. Sawicki (2000) makes a similar argument with respect to historical studies of Jesus and the New Testament. She states, “…some current ‘social science’ approaches to historical study of Jesus invoke blind causal forces and so exclude the possibility of innovative social agency.” (p. 62). She notes that hypotheses are not data and discusses Lenski as a specific example.

Barrera (2013) makes similar claims about social science models used by scholars to describe the political economy of Ancient Israel.
He reviews four models, stating that a common feature of the four is that peasants had no power and lived a precarious existence. He notes that the archaeological evidence is not consistent and reconciles the evidence by claiming that the evidence does not support the claim that the peasants were stripped of their land and debt slavery became ubiquitous. However, he also notes that the prophets could have been reacting to the fact that some peasants were cheated out of their land and suffered economically and that this would be sufficient to generate the prophets’ critiques of society. Barerra suggests that Israelite peasants in the time of the First Temple were able to provide for their families even with the taxes imposed by the monarchy because of utilizing longstanding practices of mutual assistance as outlined in the Torah (pp. 32–51).

The Biblical Evidence

The evidence from the Hebrew Scriptures does not provide an answer to whether Israel or Judah engaged in land reform and other welfarist actions. The Scriptures do not state whether or not the kings engaged in land reform. 2 Kings gives the reason for Israel’s defeat by the Assyrians:

This happened because the Israelites sinned against the LORD their God….They worshipped other gods and followed the customs of the nations which the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites and the customs which the kings of Israel had practiced.” (2 Kings 17:7–8, JPS)

The text goes on to discuss offering sacrifices at shrines where they were not supposed to, setting up pillars, making idols, and so on. The reasons have to do with idolatry and improper worship. There is nothing in the passage about socioeconomic issues. In chapter 21, the reign of Manasseh is described. He is accounted as an extremely wicked king, both for failing to keep the cultic law but also for much bloodshed. The final destruction of Judah is attributed to his sins.

The end of 2 Chronicles offers a similar category of offenses for Judah but adds that the captivity to Babylon fulfilled the word of God spoken by Jeremiah, “…until the land paid back its sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept sabbath, till seventy years were completed.” (36:21, JPS). The sabbaths can be a reference to failures to forgive debts in the seventh year as well as failure to observe the Jubilee year.9
But the biblical evidence, as used by Silver as well as many biblical scholars, is not straightforward. Many if not most modern biblical scholars, whether Jewish or Christian, regard the narrative from Joshua to 2 Kings as historically unreliable. One reason for this skepticism is the number of years from when events happened and when the narrative, known as the Deuteronomic History, was written down. Since 2 Kings refers to the Babylonian captivity, it had to have been completed sometime after the fall of Jerusalem, which occurred in 586, while some of the events recorded would have taken place 500 years earlier or more. Some scholars accept that oral traditions could have been handed down and could have been reliable to a degree, and some accept that the final editor of the history could have had other references and chronicles to draw from, which would enhance the reliability of the history. Other scholars reject both those possibilities as likely to generate reliable history. Since 2 Chronicles refers to the capture of Babylon by Persia, it had to be completed even later. There are also scholars who believe the relevant books were not written until the time of Alexander the Great or the time of the Hasmoneans (second century). The Upsalla School is known for the latter viewpoint, and Silver explicitly acknowledges his debt to research from that school. That is, Silver is utilizing the most skeptical school of thought concerning the historical reliability of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Silver’s characterization of the prophets is not typical for biblical scholars, however. Even biblical scholars who are very skeptical of the historical reliability of the Deuteronomistic History or the Chronicles are more inclined to treat the prophets as legitimate social critics trying to bring the nation back to living more justly. On the other hand, many biblical scholars also critically read the prophets, and doubt that much of what is recorded as the words of a prophet really were spoken by the prophet. Instead, followers of the prophet or his school edited and altered and added materials over a substantial period of time, so that it is not easy to determine when a particular criticism of Israelite life or governance refers to the time period of the prophet himself or of a later time period.

Archaeological Evidence

When biblical archaeology began early in the last century, the goal often was to find evidence to support the historicity of the Bible. Archaeologists often searched in places and looked for items based
on a particular biblical text. Early findings supported the splendor of Solomon’s kingdom, for example. However, much of the material has been re-dated by more recent archaeologists, so that stables originally assigned to the time of Solomon are now placed in the time period of the Omri Dynasty in Israel about 150 years later than Solomon. Modern scholars are critical of an approach that finds an artifact and then tries to connect it to a biblical time or person. A pertinent question is: Do biblical preconceptions affect the interpretation of archaeological data?

This is an argument used by Silver. In general, archaeologists claim that there is substantial evidence for increasing wealth in Israel in the eighth century and increasing wealth in Judah in the seventh century. But what about income inequality or exploitation? Excavations at Tirzah in Israel have been cited as evidence of increasing income inequality in the northern kingdom. De Vaux (1967) says that the early Israelite period showed a uniformity of dwellings that suggests no social inequality, but in the eighth century a clear separation between the rich quarter and the poor quarter can be seen. Silver (1983) comments,

But I am troubled by the fact that neither of De Vaux’s articles on Tizrah provides a direct description of the poor quarter or of the specifics of its alleged steady decline. My misgivings are further heightened by the fact that in both the 1956 and the 1967 articles we are, on the same page, reminded that Amos and Hosea condemned social inequality… In my mind it is an open question whether biblical preconceptions have affected De Vaux’s interpretation of the excavations. (p. 116).

Modern archaeologists in Israel and its neighbors claim to be more objective in their work, and are not trying to prove the Bible true. In fact, many seem to presume the Bible is not factual. Some archaeologists go so far as to rely only on the archaeological record and not rely on the Bible at all. But there are limits to what archaeology can show, as noted by Dever (1995):

Finally, it must be cautioned that in this initial attempt to discern Iron Age social structure archaeologically, we can rarely be more than suggestive; the data as excavated and published were not designed originally to address the issue focused on here, and they can be redirected only to a limited extent. (p. 418).
Further, while many sites have been excavated in lands that were part of Ancient Israel and Judah, many of the sites are only partially excavated, and many areas, especially what would have been villages, have not been excavated at all. Additionally, some key areas of Jerusalem have not been excavated due to current political and religious tensions.

An Examination of the Geopolitical Landscape

We cannot just talk about the economy because Israel and Judah were often entwined with foreign powers. Prior to the formation of the state of Israel there were four to five empires that existed in the area and competed with each other—Egypt, Mittani, Babylon, Assyria, and Hatti. The geographic area of these empires included Egypt, central Turkey, southern Turkey and into Syria and the traditional areas of Assyria and Babylon. Syria was the area these empires wanted to control because of trade routes that included both north-south and east-west routes. Syria and Israel were part of an important land bridge between the major agricultural areas associated with Mesopotamia and Egypt. Around 1200–1000 all these powers went into decline and there were mass movements of people around the entire area of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Some scholars think there was a change in the climate that impacted food production and induced many of the migrations. By 1000 Israel existed primarily in the hill country where agriculture was more difficult but the difficult terrain provided protection from invading armies.

After the division of Israel into Israel and Judah, some of the former powers reasserted themselves. According to 1 Kings, in the fifth year of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, Shisak, King of Egypt, came and carried off treasures from Jerusalem. Israel and Judah often skirmished with one another, although over time Israel and Aram often battled. But in 853, the combined efforts of Aram and Israel and some other small nations in the area managed to hold off Assyria in the Battle of Qarqar. However, once the external threat was thwarted, they resumed to fighting one another, and Ahab was killed in the Battle of Ramah Gilead.

The latter portion of the ninth century was a period of Assyrian weakness and a time of supremacy in the region by Aram-Damascus. But, the reigns of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah saw resurgence in the power and wealth of both. They each controlled some
portions of important trade routes. It was during their reigns that Amos, Hosea and Isaiah appeared.

With the death of Jeroboam and Uzziah, the window of opportunity for maintaining supremacy in the region closed. Tiglath-Pileser III came to power in Assyria and Assyria reasserted itself as the dominant power. Israel and Aram-Damascus formed a coalition to battle Assyria and wanted Judah to join them. Judah refused and faced attack, so the king, Ahaz, appealed to Assyria for help. Assyria did as requested and Judah became a vassal state of Assyria. Later, Hoshea, king of Israel from 732–722, went to Assyria to acknowledge he was a vassal of Assyria. But Egypt went to battle with Assyria and Israel joined forces, leading to Assyria invading the region and destroying the nation of Israel in 722.

Beginning with Ahaz, Judah paid annual tribute to Assyria for about a century. Lowery (1991) states, “Under this kind of system, one would expect to find in a vassal economy a greater push toward surplus and trade-oriented production, greater consolidation of land, and greater disparity of wealth.” (p. 134). The trade orientation came from the fact that Assyria demanded goods from Judah that were not produced by Judah, so they had to trade to get the necessary tribute to pay Assyria.

Hezekiah (716/15–687/86) was a loyal vassal of Sargon II of Assyria. During this time, Judah prospered as they reaped profits from the caravan trade (Rainey and Notley, 2014, p. 239). But when Sargon II died, many people in the Levant took it as a sign to break free from the yoke of Assyria. Hezekiah did so, although with disastrous results. Sennacherib invaded the area, destroyed many cities in Judah, although not Jerusalem, and continued to collect tribute from Judah.

Judah was poor and devastated after the Assyrian invasion. The next king, Manasseh, tried to rebuild, partially by entering into trade relations with Tyre. Gradually, Judah expanded and grew economically. Under Josiah (641/640–609) Judah controlled much of the region that had been Israel. Judah’s most prosperous time was that of Josiah, although Hezekiah’s time also was very prosperous (Vaughn 1999). Babylon defeated Assyria in 609, and Egypt tried to fill the vacuum. Judah became a vassal of Egypt. Ultimately, Babylon defeated Egypt and then invaded Judah, leading to the deportation of many Jews to Babylon. Judah as an independent nation ceased to exist. At the return from exile, Judah is a province of Persia. Later, they were under Greek rule and finally Roman rule until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
What Can Be Said About Economic Structures?

Over time, Judah and Israel moved from subsistence farming to more specialized farming, at least in some regions. The location in the land bridge between Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as access to goods and markets around the Mediterranean would naturally lead to increased specialization in agricultural products like olive oil and wine. There is archaeological evidence of this kind of specialization in some parts of Israel and Judah. Some of the push for specialization probably came from the transition to monarchy as well as during times of vassalage in which tribute had to be paid to the ruling empire.

As noted above, the times of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah were times of relative autonomy as Assyria was in a weakened state. Israel and Judah could prosper from controlling some of the important trade routes and trade. But even after Assyria destroyed Israel and decimated much of Judah, prosperity returned. Faust and Weiss (2005) attempt to describe the economic system that prevailed in the area that included Judah in the seventh century. They claim that Judah was part of an economic system that included Philistia, while both were vassals of Assyria. They also claim that the destruction caused by the Babylonian armies at the time of the fall of Jerusalem left layers of material that can be analyzed by archaeologists today, so we can know more about the period. There is substantial evidence for expansion into previously uncultivated areas south and east of Jerusalem in the period after Assyria destroyed much of the area in the time of Isaiah. The patterns of living and production for the region over to the Mediterranean Sea suggest a region in which there was substantial specialization of production and trade. The major products were wine, olives, wheat, and products from cattle, sheep and goats. Ashkelon was the major city and port, as some of the trade was involved with other parts of the eastern Mediterranean region, including Egypt. Jerusalem also expanded during this time, with wine production in the area as well as wheat production in the newly cultivated areas. Further, they argue that Assyrian policy actually enabled the prosperity in the region.

Holladay (1995) notes that archaeological evidence supports a view of a relatively egalitarian society as reflected in the housing—primarily comprised of three- or four-room pillared houses—in early Israel (circa 1500–1200). However, by the mid tenth century there are new governmental centers, indicating, “...a major instance of secondary
state formation in this southern Levant.” (p. 372). The palaces and elite buildings do not derive from local traditions, but reflect Syro-Hittite, and possibly Phoenician, origin. The sites also show signs of destruction shortly thereafter, which Holladay believes was due to the campaigns of Sheshonq of Egypt around 925. However, after a few decades both Judah and Israel experienced economic growth and prosperity as evidenced by building programs in places like Samaria, Megiddo, Lachish, and Jerusalem.

Houston (2010) notes that a widely-held assumption in the study of ancient society is that farmers and agricultural workers were victims of social oppression. The urban elites exploited those who worked the land and whose labor generated the output used by the elites for their own comfort. Houston states that had been his view for years, but he had come to change this view. He argues that evidence does not support such an urban/rural split. Instead, he sees those oppressed as described by the Hebrew prophets as the poor who lived in the urban areas. Part of his argument is that the activity of the prophets tended to be in the city. Further, the sociological models used often rely on patronage, but patronage was a system with face-to-face relationships and not one of absentee landlords. The many references in the prophets to the poor in the gate would refer to cities because villages didn’t have the large defensive walls of cities in which to place gates.

Faust (2000) describes houses in village areas in the region as larger than houses in the cities, and suggests that the major difference was the use of an extended family to farm the land in the rural areas while houses in urban areas were dwelt in by nuclear families. He does not find evidence of large homes in rural areas where a rich landowner lived who might exploit the peasants. In fact, he says, “There is no evidence for socioeconomic stratification in the villages.” (p. 317). Instead, the evidence supports the idea that the standard of living was normally above a subsistence level. It seems that land reform did not take place and did not need to take place in Judah.

What Then About Silver’s Hypothesis?

With increased wealth comes increased altruism, including political altruism, according to Silver. Israel became more prosperous in the eighth century and Judah in the seventh century. Silver essentially argues
that the biblical prophets of the era of the divided kingdoms belonged to elite circles, in what he calls the priestly order. These prophets influenced the rulers of Israel and Judah to implement altruistic welfarist economic reforms to benefit the poor. These reforms weakened their domestic economies making them more susceptible to conquest such that Israel and Judah succumbed to Assyria and Babylonia respectively.

While it is true that some of the prophets have associations with priestly circles (possibly Amos, clearly Jeremiah and Ezekiel), to characterize them unequivocally as members of the privileged upper class, may not be accurate. Ezekiel was in the first wave of deportees from Jerusalem to Babylon, and began prophesying several years later. Clearly, his time and location prevented him from being an elite affecting decisions by the king. Jeremiah was almost killed on a couple of occasions, and was often imprisoned. There were two parties in his day—one wanting to work with Egypt and the other that wanted to yield to Babylon. Jeremiah was in the second while the king and his key advisors wanted to join with Egypt against Babylon. Even though Silver refers to Jeremiah on a number of occasions, Jeremiah certainly did not have the influence on the king that Silver suggests the prophets had. If any prophets fit Silver’s description, it would have to be the prophets that lived during the Assyrian crisis—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah.

Evidence of the social location of these prophets is scant, and arguments from the so-called high-quality of their speech and writing is not compelling in so far as it is impossible to sort out what in their books is an accurate record of their speeches and what has been shaped by writers from their schools and from their editors. Contra Silver’s argument to the contrary, most biblical scholars would not see Amos as somehow allied with the Israelite bureaucracy (see especially Amos’s confrontation with Amaziah in Amos 7:10–17). With the exception of Isaiah, they didn’t come from Jerusalem but came from small villages—Amos from Tekoa and Micah from Moresheth. Hosea lived and prophesied in the northern kingdom and most of his message concerned idolatry and false worship rather than economic reform.

Scholars who would disagree with Silver include Mendenhall, who saw the prophets as idiosyncratic and as populists, and not as part of the state bureaucracy (1981; 2001, pp. 144–145). Wilson (1980) argues that the biblical prophets should be understood under the notion of intermediation, either central or peripheral. In their function as intermediaries,
figures such as Amos, Micah, and Jeremiah were advocates for their support groups to the governmental administration.

Ephraimite (i.e. Israelite) prophets seem to have functioned primarily on the periphery of society. With a few notable exceptions, they became spokesmen for the characteristic social, political, and religious views of their Ephraimite support groups and used prophetic authority to attempt to change the central social structure both in Ephraim and in Judah. They apparently ceased to play a role in the central cult and had no voice in governmental affairs. (Wilson 1980: 252).

Epsztein (1986) cites numerous biblical scholars who describe the prophets as outside the structure of government, and as critics of government policy.

We do not have evidence either from scripture or other records to know if either Israel or Judah pursued land reform or other welfare-types of programs. The Covenant Code and the Deuteronomic Code have laws that are applicable to what might be considered Israel’s economic life: for example, laws about lending and interest, wages and work rules, debts and periodic cancellation of debts. Such rules are in place, but it is not clear if these were articulated as changes from past practice (to be implemented as reforms) or if they were part of Israel’s ongoing social and economic life, from the time of the Settlement and onwards.

The archaeological record would suggest that land reform was not done because it was not needed. That is, the rural areas operated much as they had although the farmers engaged in more specialized production over time. The argument about consolidation of land leading to the pauperization of peasants, so-called latifundialization, is not supported by archaeology or even the Hebrew prophets. Again, the prophets were addressing urban settings. Amos referred to people adding house to house, but this would be in an urban setting and not involve the confiscation of agricultural land. What we can say with relative certainty is that the times of Jeroboam II and Hezekiah were prosperous times for Israel and Judah. They had some control over key trade routes and engaged in trade that included importing and exporting to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other parts of the eastern Mediterranean. There was increased specialization of production, with olive oil, wine, and probably wheat, as
export products. There are also signs of increased government building and military prowess. However, we cannot say with certainty that the prosperity benefited all or whether there was social stratification and exploitation of the peasants. We think the prophets are reliable and do not find evidence to support Silver’s treatment of the prophets.\textsuperscript{14}

We think the second part of Silver’s hypothesis—that the reforms weakened the economy and the nations making them vulnerable to Assyria and Babylon can be refuted. Israel and Aram-Damascus held off Assyria at one time, but Assyria continued to grow stronger. Given the size of Israel and Judah versus that of Assyria and later Babylon, they would not have been able to stand up successfully to either power. For them to remain independent would have required a miracle. They could have survived and even prospered to some extent if they had remained content to be vassals of the great powers. The prophet Jeremiah told the king and the people not to rebel and to accept vassalage by Babylon. He was aligned with a group that opposed rebellion and many aligned with this group left Jerusalem and settled in Mizpah, where eventually Gedaliah was established as Babylon’s representative. It was rebellion that led to the siege, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the exile.\textsuperscript{15} Earlier, in Isaiah’s time, Assyria failed to capture and destroy Jerusalem, but Assyria devastated the rest of Judah and Judah remained a vassal of Assyria.

Ultimately, the major evidence Silver uses is archaeological, which is tenuous at best. He relies heavily on the theory he developed in \textit{Affluence, Altruism, and Atrophy} to support his arguments. But the data are not able to support them. The use of modern economic analysis to explore economic activity in ancient economies is controversial to many non-economists. Often, as is the case of several we cited in the economic models section, Polanyi (Polanyi and Pearson 1981) is used as an authority to show that using standard economic analysis to ancient economies is misguided because markets were not used to organize economic activity then. Silver (1995a) is a refutation of Polanyi. Other economic historians have done so as well. But Silver’s model suffers from the same problems as Lenski’s model: both claim that a certain scenario always follows a certain level of agricultural land economic development. There is evidence that trade increased and there was greater prosperity at some of the time periods considered. The benefits of trade were real although transportation costs and transaction costs were more
substantial than today. This does not imply that Israel or Judah automatically took on the characteristics of the mature agricultural economy that Lenski claims always happens nor the political altruism Silver claims follows increased prosperity. It is more likely that traditional behavior continued in the rural areas.

Conclusions

While we cannot definitively refute Silver’s hypothesis, we think the evidence is more consistent with a traditional view of the prophets. Greater care needs to be used by scholars when employing economic or other social science models. We cannot use models to create data. We reject the idea that there are “iron laws” of the development of a society. The prophetic writings can be used in evaluating their society as well as our society if done so carefully. The negative view of kings listed by Samuel is consistent with the behavior of many of the kings of Israel. It is also consistent with the behavior of many monarchs in other places and other times.

Endnotes

2. All dates in the paper are BCE.
3. This is not due to changing tastes but changing incomes and altruism has a high income elasticity of demand.
4. We examine the model more closely in the next section of the paper: Economic Models.XXX [Please provide sub-heading for the section you are referring to].
6. Silver (1995a) is a refutation of Polanyi (1981) who argued markets were not important in the ancient world. Silver cites considerable evidence of important market activities occurring in the Ancient Near East. He sees the usage of markets as enabling most members of society to be better off economically.
7. This is an unfortunate term because biblical archaeologists and scholars use the term for those who think the historical books of the Hebrew Scriptures are reliable historically while a minimalist is one
who things there is very little of historical value in them. By this definition, Silver is a minimalist although Cheney is referring to Silver as an economist.

8. Translation by the Jewish Publication Society. Chaney used his own translation but his interpretation does not depend on which translation is used.

9. The book also has a different perspective on Manasseh. He is described as very sinful but that he repented later and had some positive accomplishments.

10. The Book of Deuteronomy was written about the time of Josiah, according to many scholars, and the strict monotheism and the idea of a single centralized place of worship in Jerusalem did not exist in the life of Israel or Judah until this time, circa 622.

11. An example is Jeremias (1998) in which he identifies portions of Amos coming from the time of Amos, portions somewhat later and other portions post-exilic.


13. See Podany (2010) for an examination of the region and these empires, as well as how they interacted with one another.

14. See Epsztein (1986, p. 93–4) for additional support.


16. There is a large literature in economics that examines both ancient and primitive economies with modern economic tools. The absence of many modern markets, e.g., insurance, forced other ways to cope with risk. Many of the laws in Deuteronomy have the effect of enhancing risk-sharing among the people.

References


