JOSEPHUS AS A SOURCE FOR ECONOMIC HISTORY: PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES

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Introduction

At the outset we must point out that no one today would take seriously research on a historical period that does not have at least some presentation and discussion of the economic milieu. Can you imagine a history of modern Ireland without a discussion of the potato famine or the developments in industrialization? Even without a slavish and no longer fashionable dedication to the Marxist approach to history, one still recognizes the importance of the economic background to a better understanding of most if not all historical problems.¹

However when we come to presenting a history of the Second Temple period we are faced with the unpalatable truth that the sources for economic history so handily available to our colleagues who deal with modern or even medieval history are for us very few and disparate.²

True we have an inscription here, a papyrus there, and coins everywhere, but that is nowhere near the wealth of material that stands waiting for the historian of later periods.

We lack the mountains of data, the census, the tax rolls, the pay records, and the legal records of permits and litigation that serve the historians of other periods so well.

What we have is Josephus.

Josephus is certainly our most important source for the history of Second Temple Judea.³ Without Josephus one might reasonably claim that we do not have a history of the period. He is the primary source for the political history of the era, providing detailed information

¹ For an example of an historian who presented Second Temple Judea in a Marxist light see the writings of H. Kreissig, and especially Kreissig 1989, 265–77.
² An example of an influential historical survey which includes a sub-chapter on the economy is Lewis 1995.
³ See the extensive bibliographies such as Feldman 1984, Schreckenberg 1997, and most recently the on-line bibliography at http://pace.cns.yorku.ca.
on governments, leaders, wars and revolutions. We use him to fill in gaps in our knowledge of Roman History, Hellenistic History, and even the history of the Parthian Kingdom.

In addition he serves as a most enlightening source for the religious and cultural history of the time. We fill in the picture presented by rabbinic sources with knowledge gleaned from Josephus. He even tells us about religious developments in the pagan world. These and more, his usefulness to archaeology and historical geography are beyond question. What would we know of Masada, Gamla, Herodion, Caesarea, Jerusalem, and so many more famous sites if we did not have Josephus to explain the history behind the material culture now found in excavations?

These aspects of Josephus have been known and utilized by generations of scholars. But, also scattered throughout Josephus’ compositions is a plethora of information on economy and economic matters. This information is almost never developed into well-elucidated narratives, but remains anecdotal. Much of this information is difficult to analyze, and even more difficult to confirm. Can we rely on this information in order to draw useful conclusions and gain insights into historical questions having economic aspects? Can we use Josephus for economic history?

Regarding this question the comments made in a recent review of a book dealing with questions of economic history present us with one answer: I quote with excisions and emendations, the italics are mine:

Extracting piecemeal information... from the extant textual sources the author’s approach comes at the expense of general theoretical issues... and archaeological evidence... Unfortunately, the limited nature of written sources... makes his approach rather unsatisfying. His arguments are often ad hoc, and he is frequently reduced to wringing information on the agricultural economy from literary works... that were never intended for such purposes. (He) is not clear and convincing in answering these questions because of limited focus on textual sources...4

We think the major thrust of this writer can be summed up in his words “wringing information on the agricultural economy from literary works never intended for such purposes.”

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4 Harrison 1999.