
This volume is a contribution to the study of the economic history of Jewish society in late antiquity, focusing on markets and marketing in Roman Palestine, 70-400 C.E. The market is understood as an institution for vending merchandise and a meeting place for buyers and sellers (1), while marketing is defined as the processes involved in transferring goods from producers to consumers (3). Rosenfeld and Menirav’s approach to the topic is to compare primary sources from late antique Palestine against a portrait of the economy of the greater Roman world sketched from secondary literature. While epigraphy and archaeology are utilized to some extent, Rosenfeld and Menirav primarily draw upon rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Tosefta, midrashic works, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, etc.) for historical information on Roman Palestine. They trace the diachronic development of various commercial institutions and professions, utilizing rabbinic attributions to place traditions in a chronological sequence.

In chapter one, Rosenfeld and Menirav touch upon the Hebrew term for market—*shuk*, which carries three different senses: a marketplace, a street, and/or any open area. Because these ambiguities in the meaning of *shuk* pose serious problems for understanding Palestinian markets (as noted by Rosenfeld and Menirav), an explanation of the authors’ criteria for sorting out the various meanings of the term would have been helpful (cf. 2-3). Next, Rosenfeld and Menirav draw upon secondary literature to argue that the economy of Second Temple period Judea (pre-70 C.E.) was autarkic, agrarian, and self-sufficient, and that this system was disrupted in the subsequent centuries by political, economic and military crises. By the fourth century, the Jews (now in Galilee) fully participated in a market-centered economy that featured economic integration with non-Jews, specialization of labor, and urbanization.

Chapter two discusses permanent markets—purpose-built facilities where vendors offered goods and services on a daily basis. The cities and towns of Israel often had multiple permanent markets, which were characterized by their geographic location (the upper/lower market in the upper/lower city) and/or specialized product lines (markets for wool, fish, etc.)

Chapter three explores periodic markets—temporary markets held at regular intervals throughout the year. The largest and least frequent type of periodic market in the ancient world was the fair. Early Tannaitic literature’s disapproval of fairs (due to their frequent connection with pagan festivals) was later softened as a practical measure in light of Jewish society’s increased economic integration with non-Jews.
In chapter four, Rosenfeld and Menirav catalogue the marketers and vendors mentioned in rabbinic literature. For each type of marketer/vendor (wholesaler, baker, peddler, etc.), Rosenfeld and Menirav explore its operation, function, and development. These professionals performed largely complimentary roles and formed a harmonious marketing chain that efficiently moved products from producer to end user. This chapter is organized according to the marketers’ geographic spheres of operation—a layout which lacks some utility in light of Rosenfeld and Menirav’s concession that many marketers operated in multiple spheres (73, 116-17).

Chapter five explores pricing and price regulation as Rosenfeld and Menirav argue that prices for goods and services sold in Palestine were neither free-floating nor arbitrarily fixed and static. Instead, Rosenfeld and Menirav champion a middle-of-the-road course in which local authorities pegged and readjusted the legal market price (sha‘ar) throughout the year in order to reflect fluctuations in supply and demand. However, that >M. Bava Metzi’a 5:1, 5:7, and >B. Bava Metzi’a 63a indicate that the sha‘ar constitutes an officially [my emphasis] fixed price is not as self-evident as Rosenfeld and Menirav assert it to be (143-44). In fact, these sources do not mention official price regulation of any kind and the sha‘ar can be profitably understood as simply the market price established by, and contingent upon, supply and demand forces alone. Whatever the case may be, Rosenfeld and Menirav rightly note that price regulation is only as effective as an authority’s ability to enforce it. While this task was handled adequately in large cities by Roman supervisory bodies, these officials tended to be less effective in small settlements and rural areas. This void, Rosenfeld and Menirav argue, was filled by the rabbis, who purposefully devised halakhic regulations on pricing, fraud, and hoarding in order to enforce the sha‘ar, as “Within Jewish society there would have been religious and moral pressure, including threats of punishment from the religious leadership and its Beth-Din (court)” (142). Indeed, in this chapter Rosenfeld and Menirav argue that the sages played an active and influential role on their economic environment.

Chapter six sketches the sages’ attitudes towards commerce, synthesized from a corpus of texts that are often ambivalent. The rabbis held negative views towards commerce, though the hostility found in early Tannaitic sources became more moderate in talmudic times as markets became increasingly indispensable. Rosenfeld and Menirav note that a number of sources suggest that the rabbis intentionally abstained from intervening in the regular operation of the marketplace—a highly problematic assessment which undermines the authors’ own findings in chapters three and five, where the sages play an essential role in the proper functioning of the market. While Rosenfeld and Menirav briefly concede this difficulty (179), more discussion and explanation would have been welcomed due to the issue’s importance to the overall argument of the book. Rosenfeld and Menirav