

HGS Sponsors International Colloquium on Privatization at NYU

by Dr. Cay Hehner

On November 17-18, 1994, nine scholars came to New York from Russia, Germany, Italy, Israel and Canada, as well as from Harvard and the University of Illinois, to join a colloquium on *Privatization in the Ancient Near East and Classical World*. The NYU conference traced the dynamics of privatization through its first three thousand years, 3500-500 BC, from Bronze Age Mesopotamia through Biblical, classical Greek and Roman times. Organized by the Henry George School's Research Director, Dr. Michael Hudson, and Prof. Baruch Levine of NYU's Skirball Dept. of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, the colloquium was composed of leading archaeologists, cuneiformists and philologists representing each major period and geographic region of antiquity.

This was a groundbreaking symposium, whose main purpose was to establish a binding terminology and a framework for the subsequent exploration of economic issues in antiquity. Papers from this conference will be published under the aegis of Harvard University's Peabody Museum at the end of 1995.

Quickly it became clear that economic mores and rites in these ancient lands serve as an excellent mirror for the burning socio-economic issues of our day. Why, asked this panel of scholars, should we follow the Babylonians, Phoenicians, ancient Greeks and Romans into the abyss, if their respective mistakes can be shown to have a common thread, interpretable and therefore avoidable?

Michael Hudson's introductory paper showed from the outset that our smiling at the idea of "cyclical time" as a primitive conception is by no means adequate. It is, he reasons, rather a social expediency. The modern view of the self-regulating market may compare less favorably with the ancient wisdom than has been customarily thought. Across the ancient Near East, debts—particularly at the then-customary interest rate of 20%, could not be reasonably expected to be paid back. Dr. Hudson asked, "Has rent always been usury?"

In the ensuing discussions two paramount questions asserted themselves—issues that each discussant addressed in their research and spoke to in their conclusions. The first crucial question was articulated by Dr. Hudson: "When did property and responsibility become separated?" The second, according to Prof. Baruch Levine, concerns the fact that "public" and "private" are relative terms that must be placed in their historical context. How big, for example, does an extended family need to get to not be private anymore? If land is bestowed by a King, but periodically restored to its ancestral owners, is it "private"?

Another major issue debated at this conference concerned the methodological question of the relative importance of various kinds of evidence. The reliability of linguistic vs. *(continued on back page)*

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(continued from front page) archaeological evidence was debated, and the special concerns and pitfalls entailed in both were discussed.

A particularly rich and detailed source of evidence on all manner of social structures, including economic ones, is the Hebrew Bible, the specialty of Dr. Baruch Levine. If one reads the Old Testament with an eye toward the interpretation of economic practices (as has seldom been intensively done,) one will be well-rewarded.

The conference was received with tremendous enthusiasm by its participants. Plans were set in motion for further symposia to build on the work begun here, and the published papers are eagerly anticipated by others in the various fields. 