

Discovering Jesus Course

61

Jesus Learns a Trade

In first century Israel, a boy generally began formal apprenticeship in a trade when he was 15 years old. “According to tradition, one of the chief duties of a father is to see that his son learns a useful trade.”¹ In fact, a rabbi once said:

“Whoever does not teach his son a trade it is as if he brought him up to be a robber.”²

Every respectable Jew was expected to have a trade. Even rabbis supported themselves by tradework. For example, the heads of the two largest schools of the Pharisees were Hillel and Shammai. Hillel is reported to have been a woodcutter, and Shammai a carpenter. Paul, a disciple of Gamaliel (**Acts 22:3**), Hillel’s grandson, was a tent-maker by trade, as were Aquila and Priscilla (**Acts 18:2-3; 20:34; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:9**). This strong work ethic is reflected throughout the New Testament, for even to the Gentile Thessalonians, Paul states in **2 Thessalonians 3:10**:

“For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’”

The Gospel record leaves us in no doubt as to the trade that Jesus learnt. We know that Joseph, Jesus’ legal father, was a carpenter, for at one time the Nazarenes refer to Jesus as “the carpenter’s son” (**Matthew 13:55**). But more than that, we know that Jesus himself was a carpenter, for in **Mark 6:3** the villagers refer to him as such.

Timothy Blackburn provides some helpful background on the state of carpentry in the first century:

“...the era in which Jesus lived was a ‘Golden Age’ of woodworking. All major joinery was developed by His time, including mortise and tenon, dovetail, etc...[T]he capability to turn objects on the lathe was well developed. A carpenter was needed to make items for all aspects of life, including framing for the roofs of house, doors and frames, tables, beds, objects for the culinary arts such as turned bowls and cups and other utensils. Objects for the farm were also needed, such as yokes and plows. And don’t forget major building projects that were initiated by Herod the Great and later by his sons. In fact,

Herod's son Antipas built the capital of Galilee just miles from Nazareth, called Sepphoris. Sepphoris was a completely Greco-Roman city, and would have required the services of carpenters. Some have speculated that Jesus and his stepfather Joseph may have worked there.”³

Jesus' initial familiarization with carpentry probably began at an early age, as he watched his father sawing long beams of wooden, planing them smooth and chiseling them into shape. Like other boys his age, formal apprenticeship for Jesus would have began at the age of 15, working with his father at the carpenter's shop, which may have been a storefront at the front of their home.

“It seems likely that Joseph worked in his doorway or just outside of his house, which may have been one in a row of craftsmen's shops at the center of town, but he probably stored his tools and materials inside. Joseph must have owned a substantial kit of tools, some of which he accumulated in his own lifetime, some of which he inherited from his father. Basic carpenter's tools included an ax for chopping down trees, an adz for shaping wood, and a hatchet. Also essential were iron saws for cutting wood to precise shapes, a bow drill and bits for drilling holes through wood, a stone-headed hammer for driving nails, a wooden mallet for pounding chisels for hammering wooden surfaces together, iron chisels and files for shaping and carving, awls for putting small holes into wood or leather, and a supply of nails. Joseph may even have owned one or more wood planes and a spoke shave, a recent innovation. Among his measuring tools were a rule, a compass or dividers, a chalk line, and of course, some pencil-like markers to score his patterns and to guide him in his cuts.”⁴

Jesus probably helped his father make farm tools (such as plows, winnowing forks, yokes, carts and wheels), house construction parts (like posts, beams, doors and window frames), furniture (including tables, chairs and storage boxes) and kitchen utensils (such as ladles, bowls, cups and the like).

The second-century writer, Justin Martyr, says this about the trade of Jesus:

“He was considered to be the son of Joseph the carpenter; and He appeared without comeliness, as the Scriptures declared; and He was deemed a carpenter (for He was in the habit of working as a carpenter when among men, making ploughs and yokes; by which He taught the symbols of righteousness and an active life).”⁵

In fact, so much did he blend into the ordinary life of a first-century Jew, those closest to him were offended when he claimed to be something more than a carpenter.

¹ *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1987), p.111.

² Quoted by Timothy Blackburn, *Richmond Antique Tool Society Newsletter*.

³ Timothy Blackburn, *Richmond Antique Tool Society Newsletter*.

⁴ *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1987), pp.111-112.

⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.