

Carpentry and Vocation During Jesus' Lost Years

—Daryn Graham—

Daryn Graham (PhD Candidate at Macquarie University)

Introduction

The earliest extant written reference that Jesus was a carpenter is in Mark's Gospel. Certainly, there is consensus among many Christian scholars that Mark's Gospel is the earliest Gospel account of its kind¹; and moreover, by as early as the fourth century it was the earliest Gospel account that the Church historian Eusebius was aware of.² According to Eusebius, and his early second century source Papias of Hieropolis, Mark's Gospel was written in Rome sometime around AD61, in order to meet Christian demand there for a compendium of Peter's recollections and knowledge of Jesus Christ. According to this early Christian tradition, as Peter began to approach advanced age while living in Rome, he was asked by the younger Christians living in and around Rome to write his recollections down. According to Eusebius, Peter then instructed Mark to record put down in writing all the things he remembered of his time with Jesus throughout his ministry, which scholars such as Johan Ferreira have observed Mark did so with simple, but thoughtful, literary style, and the end result of this process was the Gospel of Mark.³

As a result, Mark's Gospel is of inestimable importance to the study of Jesus's life, and that later Gospel writers like Matthew and Luke would draw so heavily upon its content is confirmation of that very fact.⁴ At the very outset, Mark's Gospel claims that the crux of the message about Jesus's mission to humankind begins where Mark's own account starts: with Jesus's baptism and the beginning of his ministry proper. In Mark's Gospel there are no nativity anecdotes or stories about Jesus's youth. Nonetheless, there were clearly still many Christians in Rome who wanted to learn as much as they could about their spiritual master and Messiah. Thus, according to Eusebius' reckoning, after a short period of perhaps just two years, Matthew's and Luke's Gospels were produced, and both of these featured the desired nativity accounts.⁵ But Mark's Gospel still appealed to many people in Rome and elsewhere despite its brevity, for both Matthew and Luke were to draw heavily upon it themselves while composing their own Gospels.

The Lost Years: History and Theology

When one brings up the topic of the lost years in a scholarly forum such as this, and what Jesus might or might not have done during them, one is often deterred by the uncertainties involved. However, one does not need to establish Jesus' vocation in the lost years upon imagination, for evidence for the historical context of those years is plentiful, and that can help fill the gaps, together with the biblical evidence in the Gospels. Thus, although there are few explicit descriptions of what took place during those years in the Gospels themselves, those same Gospels and the rich historical

¹ For the case for a Markan priority, see the following useful works: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'The Priority of Mark and the 'Q' Source in Luke', in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, 2 Vols. (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970) 2: 131-170; Christopher M. Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis*, SNTSMS 44 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 29-157; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1998); Scot McKnight, 'Source Criticism', in David A. Black and David S. Dockery (eds.) *Interpreting the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001) 74-105; Craig L. Blomberg, 'The Synoptic Problem: Where We Stand at the Start of a New Century', in David Alan Black and David R. Beck (eds.) *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 20-23; Scot McKnight, 'A Generation Who Knew Not Streeter: The Case for Markan Priority', in David Alan Black and David R. Beck (eds.) *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, 65-96.

² See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2. 15.

³ 1 Peter 5:13; Papias of Hierapolis in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2. 15; Johan Ferreira, 'The Markan Outline and Emphasis', in Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (eds.) *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 263-288.

⁴ Scot McKnight, 'A Generation Who Knew Not Streeter', 75-95.

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3. 4, 24, 39.

and archaeological records do shed much light on what life was like in Galilee at the time, nonetheless. One must, however handle the many and varying 'historical' approaches to the life of Jesus with care and thoughtfulness in order to arrive at a true picture of Jesus' views on vocations throughout the lost years and into his earthly ministry as this article attempts to do.

In the early twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer championed the case for the 'historical Jesus', as opposed to the Christianised Jesus, arguing that the early Church had clouded their portrayal of the real Jesus by writing about their own divinised, and dogmatically inspired, Jesus of the New Testament.⁶ This view has had some longevity – up until the the 1960s some scholars like E. Fuchs adopted it without question.⁷ However, other scholars as early as the 1950s began to raise doubt concerning this so-called quest for the 'historical' Jesus. J. M. Robinson, for instance, questioned whether the 'historical' Jesus, as Schweitzer and Fuchs envisaged him, was in fact the same person as the Jesus who lived and breathed in Nazareth two millenia ago.⁸ Soon Robinson was joined by a chorus. R. Bultmann had already begun to question whether a smooth historical process of a closed continuum of cause and effect applies in the case of somebody like Jesus who was unlike all others, and whether it applies at all to human history generally;⁹ as a result of Robinson's and Bultmann's arguments, the 'historical' Jesus came to be understood by many Christian scholars as a cipher and a misleading hypothesis rather than a method based upon facts.¹⁰ In 1964, M. Kähler finally put the nail into Schweitzer's claims by pointing out that the life-changing and indeed world-changing impact Jesus has had since his incarnation can only be explained if the Jesus of the Gospels is the true Jesus.¹¹ The quest for an 'historical' Jesus outside the Gospels thus became an absurdity.¹²

But that is not to say that historical methods have no place in our quest for Jesus. As J. Jeremias put it in the mid-1960s, when we search for Jesus we are confronted by God Himself,¹³ and as G. E. Ladd expands, we need to respect His presence in our lives by better understanding what kind of person Jesus was like. One way to do that is through both theological and historical enquiry.¹⁴ Of course, the study of history by itself does not automatically draw one to faith, but for many Christians today, an understanding of the socio-historical environment in which Jesus lived can, and does, emphasise certain aspects about Jesus' life and teachings which can greatly strengthen one's faith. Thus, to use C. F. D. Moule's terminology, historical research can turn one's 'blind faith' into 'real faith'.¹⁵

Indeed, many of the early Christians themselves would have agreed with Moule. In the Letter to the Hebrews we find the exhortation that 'faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.'¹⁶ Certainly, if one can strengthen one's faith in Jesus to the point of absolute conviction through the study of ancient history, then, rather than being discounted, those studies should actually be encouraged. Indeed, the early Christians themselves produced a corpus of writings in the New Testament, and outside it, concerning who Jesus was, what his teachings were, and what his life was like, not at all unlike Greco-Roman historico-biographic works. As a result, the pursuit of history was not without its place in the days of the early Church.¹⁷

However, the apostle Paul was also clear that exposure to such study should not replace exposure to the teachings of the word of God itself. Hence, in his Letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote that the hearing or reading of God's word is what truly nurtures one's faith: 'Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard

⁶ A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. and C. Black, 1911) 3.

⁷ E. Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964) 56.

⁸ J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1959) 26, 31.

⁹ R. Bultmann, in S. M. Ogden (ed.) *Existence and Faith* (1960), 291, cited and quoted by G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 176.

¹⁰ O. A. Piper, 'Christology and History', in *Theology Today*, 19 (1962) 333; G. E. Ladd, *A Theology*, 176.

¹¹ This view is set forth in M. Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

¹² G. E. Ladd, *A Theology*, 176-177.

¹³ J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) 21.

¹⁴ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology*, 177.

¹⁵ C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament: An Inquiry Into the Implications of Certain Features of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1967) 21.

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:1.

¹⁷ On this point see also, G. E. Ladd, *A Theology*, 174.

through the word of Christ.¹⁸ Therefore, an article such as this which brings ancient history and archaeology to bear upon the early life of Jesus must always be tempered with a sound reading and understanding of the Bible. It is the aim of this article to bring these disciplines together with the Biblical record in order to convey the importance of carpentry and vocation to Jesus, especially during the lost years of his life between the ages of thirteen to thirty.

Mark's Gospel

One passage in Mark's Gospel which is evidence for Jesus having worked as a carpenter describes a certain occasion when Jesus visited the synagogue in Nazareth. In Mark 6:1-3 the evangelist states that when Jesus attended synagogue worship one Sabbath and began to teach there, the response of the locals was one of shock. 'Where did this man get these things?' Mark recorded people asking. 'Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him'.¹⁹ In these very words the locals of Nazareth were showing doubt concerning Jesus' credentials as a spiritual teacher. They were not the kind of people to readily place their trust in someone who had no formal qualifications to lead them.²⁰ In this case, familiarity with Jesus did not bring understanding. Rather, it bred contempt. Of course, contempt is always replaceable with empathy and understanding. But their decision not to replace it did not reflect well on the locals' spiritual insights in this local carpenter or, rather, their lack thereof.

Outside the New Testament, reference to Jesus having been a carpenter is also mentioned early. Justin Martyr, writing in the early second century AD, says about Jesus that: 'He was merely a carpenter.'²¹ Furthermore, in the mid-fourth century Ephrem the Syrian wrote a hymn of praise to Jesus in which there features an implied and well-understood acceptance that Jesus was a carpenter in the following lines:

'...The imprint of your labor is seen in the ark,
And in the fashioning of the tabernacle
Of the congregation that was for a time only!
Our whole craft praises you, who are our eternal glory.
Make for us a yoke that is light, even easy, for us to bear...' ²²

But perhaps more convincing than these non-canonical early Christian testimonies is the fact that in Mark's Gospel, Simon Peter himself recalled that Jesus was a carpenter and that the population of Nazareth took it for granted. Therefore, on the basis of Peter's testimony through Mark's Gospel, and the aforementioned later non-canonical Christian sources, Jesus must have been employed as a carpenter in the footsteps of his father Joseph.

Such a conclusion is important in the search for the lost years of Jesus' life, for it appears that Jesus was more active in the carpentry trade throughout the lost years than he was during his ministry. As Luke's Gospel states, during his ministry, Jesus and his disciples were financially supported by other people's means, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Cuza who was the manager of Herod's palace, and one Susanna, 'and many others.'²³ In fact so considerable was this support that Jesus had his own treasurer, Judas Iscariot, who, not content with handling such esteemed fortunes gave in to greed and betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, which proved to be his own downfall.²⁴

¹⁸ Romans 10:17.

¹⁹ Mark 6:1-3.

²⁰ R. Alan Cole, *Mark* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1989) 168.

²¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, 7. 9; G. L. Carey, 'Justin Martyr', in J. D. Douglas and E. E. Cairns (eds.) *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 558.

²² Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns On the Nativity*, 6; J. N. Birdsall, 'Ephrem the Syrian', in J. D. Douglas and E. E. Cairns (eds.) *The New International Dictionary*, 345.

²³ Luke 8:1-3.

²⁴ Matthew 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11; Luke 22:1-6; John 12:4-6; 13:29.

It is true that this same occasion was later repeated in Matthew's Gospel, and that in Matthew's account the crowds did not asked, "Isn't this the carpenter?" but rather, "Isn't this the carpenter's son? (Italics mine)"²⁵ Some scholars have seen this as proof that Mark and Matthew had different theological purposes or agendas in mind when they wrote these two slightly different accounts, and that they expressed those hidden agendas in their alternate descriptions of Jesus either as a carpenter, or as a carpenter's son. Accordingly, so they argue, Mark wished to portray Jesus as a hardworking son of Mary whereas Matthew was trying to counter contemporary obscene speculation over the "true" identity of Jesus's biological father.²⁶ Hence, W. Wrede and his followers questioned Mark's entire historical basis on account of such differences, claiming that in cases such as this Matthew was actually correcting Mark's Gospel, a view taken up in the early 1980s by R. T. France in his Tyndale New Testament Commentary, *Matthew*.²⁷ Later, in the 1990s, I. H. Jones creatively suggested that Mark must have meant to say what Matthew disclosed, but that the early manuscripts are unclear as to Mark's precise phrasing.²⁸

However, the above debate is seriously flawed especially as we consider N. T. Wright's acute observation that the Gospels were the result of well-kept and maintained oral and written traditions verifiable by the followers of Jesus himself, and so they could not have been the product of mere editorial whim on the part of Gospel writers with hidden agendas.²⁹ Accordingly, one should any differences between Mark and Matthew not as conflicting accounts, but as complimentary works with simple differences in emphasis. Thus, Matthew was not correcting Mark. After all, Luke's Gospel says the locals on this occasion said, 'Isn't this *Joseph's son* (Italics mine)?'³⁰ By Luke's own confession, it was his sole intention in writing his Gospel not to correct Mark or Matthew, but simply to carefully investigate the earliest eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, such as Mark's, and Matthew's own if he had access to it, as well as others' too, and to make them clear to Theophilus and his audience in Rome, which was where Acts and Eusebius imply he wrote his Gospel.³¹

Thus, the locals of Nazareth need not have said, 'Jesus was a carpenter' OR that 'Jesus was a carpenter's son', OR 'Jesus was Joseph's son'. Rather, synagogues were focal Jewish community hubs in Jesus' time, and bustling with many people on the sabbaths. Therefore, on the day in question there would have been many people saying many different things in reaction to Jesus' teachings there. Accordingly, three of the things those people at the synagogue said were taken down in Mark's, Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, that: Jesus was a carpenter, and that he was a carpenter's son, and that his father's name was Joseph. Matthew and Luke were not correcting Mark's Gospel. They were supplementing it.

This sense of inheritance of a father's vocation was steeped in tradition in ancient times. In modern Western countries, we are blessed with seemingly endless career choices to suit our every personalized desire and dream. But in Roman times, and especially in regional areas like Nazareth, it was the family's trade and source of employment that was almost always handed down from father to son. The son often had little option but to take on himself his own father's trade. Although hereditary trades were not yet compulsory by law as they were to become under the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, the groundwork for rigid hereditary vocations within traditional societies was a long-serving custom already by the first century.³² In fact, in classical times paternalistic tradition mattered above almost everything else. Following the lead of the father was unquestioned.

Jesus the Carpenter

²⁵ Matthew 13:55.

²⁶ Craig A. Evans, 'Context, Family and Formation', in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 14.

²⁷ W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, (London: James Clarke, 1971) cited by Chris Forbes, 'The Historical Jesus', in Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (eds.) *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition*, 249. See also R. T. France, *Matthew* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1985) 232.

²⁸ I. H. Jones, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Epworth Press, 1994) 88.

²⁹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 133-136.

³⁰ Luke 4:22.

³¹ Luke 1:1-4; Acts 28:30-31 implies that Luke wrote Acts in Rome as a companion of Paul's. See also Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, 3. 4.

³² On hereditary trades becoming compulsory under Constantine, see *Theodosian Code*, 7. 12. 1; 8. 5. 1; 8. 5. 2.

Given that there would have been very few viable vocation choices open to Jesus in a place like Nazareth, which was so small it rates no mention in the Old Testament or in Josephus' works, inheriting Joseph's trade may not have been so unappealing. So what appears to be a discrepancy between Matthew's and Mark's Gospels disappears when we understand their context. Jesus inherited Joseph's trade. He simply had to. Jesus was therefore both a 'carpenter', as Mark states, and a 'carpenter's son', as Matthew states. Given that both Peter and Matthew were members of Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples, and the evidence in early Christian sources and contemporary scholarship for the reliance of the Gospel tradition upon their own recollections, it is likely they both learnt about both this episode and about Jesus' vocation as a carpenter during the lost years in conversation with Jesus himself. Certainly, Jesus would not have lied about such matters, and that Mark and Matthew wrote that Jesus was both a carpenter and a carpenter's son, must stem ultimately from none other than Jesus, their teacher.

Jesus would not have worked every day in a single factory the way many carpenters today do. In fact, the Greek word *tektōn* (τέκτων), which most English translations render as "carpenter," is actually more accurately translated 'builder' in our present sense of the word. In ancient times carpenters usually worked on building sites and took part in all sorts of manual building, often to do with wood, but also with stone as well.³³

There are a number of passages in the Gospels that demonstrate Jesus's carpentry experience. The original Greek in the New Testament allows one to translate Jesus's statement that taking notice of his teachings and putting them into practice is a yoke that is "easy," but equally it can be translated as a yoke that is "well fitted." Some even think this metaphor may have come about as a direct result of Jesus's own reflections during his everyday vocation as a carpenter.³⁴ Indeed, Justin Martyr thought so. As he stated with positive force, 'He was merely a carpenter, making ploughs and yokes, and instructing us by such symbols of righteousness to avoid an inactive life.'³⁵ However, Jesus' use of such vocational metaphors were not just for the purpose of encouraging active behaviour in others. Certainly, his own vocation was a shining example of the importance of work to God. But Jesus ultimately drew spiritual lessons not from work, but from God; and he only used vocational illustrations to get across to other people the spiritual lessons he wanted to convey, not simply his views on work itself. As with all of his parables, references to vocations were not a teaching in itself. Those well thought through references were just the means to carry a deeper, spiritual wisdom.

It's likely that Jesus probably reflected upon his parable of the two housebuilders while he was 'on the job'. According to this parable, a foolish man built his house on sand, and when the storms of life came, the house fell. But a wise man built his house upon rock, and when the storms of life came, his house stayed upright.³⁶ But even if this parable was based upon the daily observations Jesus made while he was at work helping construct houses and other buildings, its spiritual meaning was anything but work related. As Jesus explained, the foolish man's house represented that man's life, and the sandy foundation represented teachings other than Jesus's, and so it crashed under the pressures of life because its foundation was weak. The wise man's life, on the other hand, was wisely built upon the rock of the teachings of Jesus and remained standing despite nature because Jesus's teachings are the most solid foundation to build one's life on.³⁷ So, in typical fashion, Jesus used an everyday occurrence to illustrate an eternal truth well beyond the imaginings of ordinary human beings, and he would have been reminded of those truths while at both work and rest.

But could it have been feasible for two carpenters to be working in the small town of Nazareth? By sheer necessity, Jesus and Joseph would have had to spend a lot of time working beyond Nazareth. This plain reality has inspired some scholars to put forward the plausible theory that Jesus could have worked on site at the new major Roman cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. Both were located not too far from Nazareth, and both underwent considerable construction and expansion during Jesus's own lifetime.³⁸

³³ Evans, 'Context', 14.

³⁴ Evans, 'Context', 14.

³⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, 7. 9.

³⁶ Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49.

³⁷ Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49.

³⁸ For a general discussion, see D. E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (1986).

Now, such a scenario may appear entirely fanciful at first glance, but to put it simply, Jesus's family had to eat, and both Joseph and Jesus would have had to follow work and, indeed, work hard together just to feed their family. Jesus had four younger brothers and any number of younger sisters (whose names have not survived) to feed; he belonged to a big family, and when Jesus began to work, none of those siblings would have been employed themselves. Jesus had to work hard by necessity and out of obedience to Joseph, who, as the father of the family, was at all times considered the head of the household, as was customary. This indicates that while as a child Jesus had the luxury of playing with his brothers and sisters at home, by the time he was a young man, that luxury would have been a thing of the past. Work called, and his boss was his own dad, and Jesus was duty-bound to answer the call and work with his father in obedience whenever he had to and wherever it was that Joseph's work took them. Thus the divine son, the "beginning and the end," and the possessor of a heavenly nature must have worked very hard to make ends meet for his family while he lived as a man in a large family on earth, and he would have needed to travel for work in order to do so.

Sepphoris: The Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence from Galilee is plentiful, and that evidence illuminates much for us about what life was like in Galilee when Jesus lived and worked there throughout the lost years. However, this archaeological evidence has been interpreted and reinterpreted differently since the late twentieth century. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, excavations were carried out at Sepphoris—originally a Persian city situated just six kilometers north-northwest of Nazareth, and one that was redeveloped by Herod Antipas with Roman collaboration at precisely the time of the lost years—and also at Tiberias, a city founded by Herod Antipas on the western shoreline of the Sea of Galilee in honor of the emperor Tiberius in AD 20. These cities, especially Sepphoris, reveal much about what life was like for Jesus as a carpenter during the lost years.

Archaeological excavation and study at Sepphoris has had a colourful history. Initial archaeological discoveries at Sepphoris in the late twentieth century caused a real stir among scholars. When Greco-Roman architecture, including a Roman-style theater, were discovered at Sepphoris, and Greco-Roman artistic works depicting emperors, various deities, and mythological heroes such as Hercules and Dionysus were uncovered on the walls of buildings there, it set tongues wagging throughout academia.³⁹ But even though archaeological findings are always provisional and open to alteration, especially since archaeology is a continual process at specific sites and their surrounding regions, some scholars jumped at the chance to rewrite history. From the late 1980s on, B. L. Mack and others began to portray Galilee as a place that had been awash with Hellenistic culture during Jesus's own lifetime.⁴⁰ This led R. A. Batey and H. C. Kee to their conclusions in the early 1990s, that the Galileans of Jesus' time had long forgotten their once proud Judaic traditions, and had openly embraced and adopted the new and exciting Greco-Roman culture, together with its pagan cults, on a vast scale.⁴¹

As a worker in an intensely Greco-Roman cultural climate, such as that in the Roman town of Sepphoris, it was inevitable, F. G. Downing and B. L. Mack claimed, that Jesus must have been just as influenced by pagan Greco-Roman culture as were other Galileans, building Roman temples and digesting Greek myths and philosophy. So it was put forward by these authors that Jesus, far from being a strict Jew, was in fact more like one of the Greco-Roman Cynic teachers who traveled throughout the Roman Empire teaching Greco-Roman philosophy, not Jewish wisdom, to

³⁹ Mark A. Chancey, 'How Jewish Was Jesus's Galilee?' in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/August 2007, 43; Craig A. Evans, 'Context', 11.

⁴⁰ B. L. Mack, 'The Kingdom Sayings in Mark,' in *Forum*, 3, 1, 17–18; B. L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 73.

⁴¹ R. A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 14; Howard C. Kee, 'Early Christianity in the Galilee: Reassessing the Evidence from the Gospels,' in L. Levine (ed.) *The Galilee of Late Antiquity*, (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary in America, 1992) 15.

enthralled audiences.⁴² Indeed, this theory still has its own staunch adherents, especially J. D. Crossan and F. G. Downing,⁴³ even despite the fact that, in light of new discoveries, it is clearly an entirely outdated model as more recent archaeological findings demonstrate.

Archaeologists now know that Galilee, including Sepphoris, was actually anything but awash with Greco-Roman culture during Jesus's lifetime. In fact, there is hardly any sign of what could be called the adoption of Greco-Roman culture in Galilee before AD70. That is because ongoing excavations at Sepphoris, Tiberias, and elsewhere throughout Galilee have comprehensively shown time and again that Galilee was thoroughly Jewish right up until the last decades of the first century.

Since the late 1990s, archaeologists have been able to date more accurately Sepphoris' ruins and artifacts, and they have now found that many Greco-Roman aspects and features of the city belong to the period spanning the second to fourth centuries, and not the first century. The theater, for instance, can be dated to the second century, and the bath complex uncovered there dates to the fourth. In fact, prior to the second century, there was no amphitheater, no gymnasium, no stadium, no theater, and no baths or any other kinds of typical Roman architecture there.⁴⁴ In addition, archaeologists have found virtually no pig bones anywhere in Sepphoris that date to before AD 70, no pagan temples, no shrines, and no statues. Jesus was no pagan temple builder. Rather, if, or when, he worked at Sepphoris it was as a builder of Jewish buildings and Jewish public spaces. Therefore, if Jesus had actually worked at Sepphoris, and given the small size of nearby Nazareth and the importance of carpentry and construction at nearby Sepphoris at precisely the same time as the lost years that seems likely, we can understand certain things about Jesus' own 'workplace' during the lost years themselves thanks to the work of archaeologists.

For the period in which the lost years overlap at Sepphoris, archaeologists have found many quintessentially Jewish artefacts. Fragments of pottery from jars that once held water used by Jews for ceremonial washing, and many *mikva'ot* (Jewish ceremonial-washing water pools), as well as various fragments of lamps featuring the menorah of the temple in Jerusalem have been found there and all date to the early first century AD. There are also almost no coins found from the period before AD 70 that bear any images of emperors or pagan deities.⁴⁵ Therefore, far from being a gentile city in Jesus's time, the evidence points strongly to the conclusion that first-century Sepphoris was awash with Jewish religious adherents who, as Craig A. Evans puts it, were 'scrupulous in their observance of purity laws.'⁴⁶ What all this tells us is that Jesus was not in the business of Greco-Roman religion as some have suggested in the past. Rather, he helped build at Sepphoris more Jewish-centric dwellings and public buildings, probably together with many other Galilean carpenters and builders as well. Jesus' working environment was not Greco-Roman, but fervently Jewish – an appropriate vocational setting, one might say, for the young Jewish Messiah.

Sepphoris's size covers some sixty hectares, and archaeologists have calculated that if living-quarter density there was the same or similar to that of Pompeii, Sepphoris would have had a total population of nearly ten thousand

⁴² F. G. Downing, *Christ and the Cynics* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); B. L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁴³ For instance, see John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) 421; see also the general treatment in John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); F. G. Downing also advocates the argument that Jesus was a Cynic philosopher. F. G. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2000).

⁴⁴ Zeev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, 'Hellenistic and Roman Sepphoris: The Archaeological Evidence', in Rebecca Martin Nagy, Carol L. Meyers, Eric M. Meyers, and Zeev Weiss (eds.) *Sepphoris in Galilee: Crosscurrents of Culture* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 29–37; Carol Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, 'Sepphoris', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 527–536; Mark A. Chancey, 'How Jewish', 43, 54–46.

⁴⁵ These findings are outlined in detail in James F. Strange, 'First Century Galilee from Archaeology and from the Texts', in D. R. Edwards and C. T. McCollough (eds.) *Archaeology and the Galilee: Texts and Contexts in the Greco-Roman and Byzantine Periods*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 143 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997). See also M. Chancey and E. M. Meyers, 'How Jewish Was Sepphoris in Jesus' Time?', in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/August 2000, 18–33, 61.

⁴⁶ Craig A. Evans, 'Context', 12.

inhabitants.⁴⁷ A similar conclusion emerges when one calculates the population of Tiberias, which was smaller than Sepphoris, covering just forty hectares.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is somewhat puzzling why there is no mention at all in the Gospels of Sepphoris, especially if Jesus had actually worked there. But this does not mean he never visited them during the lost years. Jesus was not scared of city life per se, as Geza Vermes argued in the 1970s, and as E. P. Sanders adopted in the 1990s;⁴⁹ after all, according to the Gospel of John itself, Jesus regularly visited the city of Jerusalem up to several times a year throughout his ministry, and was familiar with other cities in Phoenicia, the Decapolis, Judaea, and based himself in Capernaum where archaeologists have found up to two thousand people packed some mere eight to nine hectares.⁵⁰

It may well be the case that while working at Sepphoris during the lost years, what Jesus saw there actually caused him to neglect them later on throughout his ministry. If so, this may explain why Sepphoris finds no mention at all in the Gospel accounts. Jesus would have seen firsthand the administration of those cities which, as S. Freyne put it in the early twenty-first century, bled the Galilean farmers dry of their resources in order to further feed their appetite to adorn their own opulent lifestyles.⁵¹ Even the most conservative calculations by E. P. Sanders estimate that at least 28 to 33 percent of all agricultural produce grown and raised on Galilean farms was siphoned off to the cities in tithes and taxes.⁵² As all Jews knew, the blessings of the Promised Land and its produce were intended by God to be enjoyed by everybody within the Jewish community, as taught by the Torah. But that was being blatantly breached by the power structures in cities like Sepphoris itself. Jesus respected order, and advocated paying to Caesar what was due to Caesar,⁵³ but it was not without just cause that Jesus proclaimed blessings to the poor, the hungry, the depressed and the socially excluded, but woes to the rich, well fed, the laughing, and those with celebrity status in his day.⁵⁴ Jesus respected authority and power, but not the excessive and oppressive exploitation of the people he loved that was on show in Sepphoris. He might have worked there through the lost years, but that did not mean that he endorsed the social inequalities which it stood for, hence his evasion of the place during his ministry.

Vocations In the Parables

Among the Galileans there existed a number of trades. Of these carpentry was but one, although a particularly popular one. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, when war erupted between Rome and the Jews in AD67, in Galilee there were 'no lack of carpenters' there.⁵⁵ Most likely, that was because of the work available to carpenters at building sites throughout Galilee, such as those at Sepphoris and Tiberias.

But Jesus was familiar with other vocations around Galilee by the start of his earthly ministry as well, some of which he drew upon in his ministerial teachings more than others. Fishing around the Sea of Galilee, a body of water whose coastal towns and cities Jesus knew well by the beginning of his ministry, was one such vocation. Although a humble

⁴⁷ Jonathan Reed, *The Population of Capernaum*, in *Occasional Papers of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity*, 24 (Claremont: 1992); see also Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Trinity Press International: 1996) 44–45.

⁴⁸ Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology*, 45.

⁴⁹ On this view see, Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Bungay: Fontana, 1976) 48–49. See also E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1995) 12, 106.

⁵⁰ Vassilios Tzaferis, *Excavations at Capernaum I: 1978-1982* (Eisenbrauns, 1989) 216; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, 103.

⁵¹ See Josephus, *Vita*, 66. 301, 373–380. S. Freyne, 'Herodian Economics in Galilee: Searching for a Suitable Model', in S. Freyne (ed.) *Galilee and Gospel: Collected Essays*, WUNT 125 (2000) 86–113. S. Freyne, 'Galilee and Judaea in the First Century', in Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) 47.

⁵² E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, 146–169. It is worth noting, however, the contrasting views of M. H. Jensen, who argues that aspects of Herod Antipas's rule might have been more beneficial than is often assumed. See M. H. Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee* (Tübingen, 2006); M. H. Jensen, 'Herod Antipas: Friend or Foe of the Historical Jesus', in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 5, 7 (2007) 7–32; M. H. Jensen, 'Purity and Politics in Herod Antipas' Galilee: The Case for Religious Motivation', in *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 11 (2013) 3–34.

⁵³ Matthew 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:20–26.

⁵⁴ Luke 6:20–26.

⁵⁵ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 3. 505.

trade, Jesus utilised fishing metaphors more than he did other, more high-profile positions like those of business employers and court-judges.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, by far the largest industry in Galilee at the time, and the one most used by Jesus in his teachings, was the farming of crops and animals for food. Josephus, who like Jesus came from Galilee, confirms this in his description of Galilee:

“The whole area is excellent for crops or cattle and rich in forests of every kind, so that by its adaptability it invites even those least inclined to work on the land. Consequently every inch has been cultivated by the inhabitants and not a corner goes to waste...the whole country is cultivated, and fruitful from end to end.”⁵⁷

It is noteworthy that in many of his parables, Jesus used agricultural metaphors to illustrate his points. This in itself demonstrates the high regard Jesus held not just for employment, but also for certain types of employment, especially those relating to agriculture and fishery. In fact, Jesus often used agricultural and fishing terms and imagery to teach profound spiritual and heavenly truths to intelligent audiences. Therefore, as we see in Mark’s Gospel, the parable of the sower presents the Gospel message as a seed being planted deep within people’s hearts and those who respond in different ways as plants that grow accordingly.⁵⁸ Also, in the parable of the growing seed, God’s kingdom is portrayed as a field of grain that God plants and reaps from,⁵⁹ and, once again, in Mark’s Gospel, the parable of the mustard seed represents the kingdom of God as being as humble as a mustard seed that grows into a huge tree.⁶⁰ These are profound spiritual truths. Yet Jesus would see fit to use agricultural metaphors to suit his audience, for agriculture surrounded him and his future audiences in Galilee during the lost years.

These were not the only farming parables Jesus used, either. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus compares the relative goodness of people’s hearts to trees with their fruit. If a tree—or, rather, a person’s heart—is good, then it will bring forth good fruit—positive words and actions.⁶¹ In addition, Luke’s Gospel describes the parable of the lost sheep, in which Jesus likened the joy in heaven over the repentance of sinners to the joy a shepherd feels when he finds a sheep that has walked off from its flock and become lost.⁶² Then, in Matthew’s Gospel, the parable of the weeds explains how the kingdom of heaven is like a field of grain and weeds that will be pulled up, sorted out, and harvested on the last day.⁶³ Lastly, in the parable of the net, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a net’s catch of fish that are sorted according to their qualities, whereupon the good ones are collected while the bad are thrown away.⁶⁴

As an inhabitant of Galilee, Jesus would have come into close contact with those in the farming vocations many times in the lead up to the launch of his ministry. Although not in the fishing industry himself, Jesus would also have been familiar with it as he traveled around the Sea’s coastal fishing hubs throughout the lost years, hence his familiarity with fishing practice by the time his ministry was underway.

By using such agricultural and fishing metaphors and parables, Jesus was in effect indicating to his Jewish audiences that he was a successor to the Old Testament prophets. The Old Testament prophets themselves likened the blessings of God to natural and agricultural occurrences. In Deuteronomy, for example, Moses looked forward to God’s blessings settling all over His people like dew from above and, at the same time, by deep spring waters from below.⁶⁵ Isaiah, too,

⁵⁶ On the dishonest steward, see Luke 16:1-8; on the unjust judge see Luke 18:1-8.

⁵⁷ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 3. 41–44.

⁵⁸ Mark 4:1–20.

⁵⁹ Mark 4:26–29.

⁶⁰ Mark 4:30–34.

⁶¹ Luke 6:43–45.

⁶² Luke 15:1–7.

⁶³ Matthew 13: 24–31, 36–43.

⁶⁴ Matthew 13:47–52.

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 33:13.

pictured Israel as God's vineyard and "the garden of His delight."⁶⁶ Later on as well, Joel would characterize God's blessings upon the Jews as the finest grain, new wine, and oil,⁶⁷—and Zechariah would symbolize God's blessings with living seeds that grow, vines that yield fruit, fertile ground that brings forth crops, and dew and rain that refresh the land and the people living on it.⁶⁸

This prophetic tradition would continue among the early Christians, too. The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, likened his preaching among them as sowing seed that God would make grow by growing them in their faith.⁶⁹ James also, in his epistle, conveyed the 'Good News' about Jesus as being like a seed that is planted in us to save us.⁷⁰

Conclusion

One may wonder at why Jesus would want to live on earth as a humble carpenter. As God personified, he certainly would have had his choice of professions on earth. The answer the apostle Paul gave to this was because Jesus chose to live as a humble servant to God the Father in everything he would do, and thereby be the perfect atoning sacrifice on behalf of humankind. In Philippians 2:8 Paul wrote, 'And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!' Yet it was for this very humility and sacrifice, Paul says in the next breath in verses 9-11, that "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' In short, for Jesus, both humble service and honest work bring great reward if done in a sincere fashion for the glory of God. That kind of humble service and honest work Jesus displayed through carpentry and building. It was not an endorsement of one vocation over another, but a sign that even the most common of vocations and those who do them are dear to him as they are to God.

As a result, for Jesus, humble work and humble service were noble vocational traits for humankind and for himself, and are as conducive to living a good life as being rich and powerful in the eyes of the world can be for many. But, for Jesus, hard, simple, and humble work was just as useful for service to God as royalty or priesthood. In any event, Jesus was already the heavenly King of kings and humanity's High Priest. He had no need, therefore, of human marks of distinction. Thus Jesus humbled himself as a hard worker in the very common and humble carpentry trade. Such one can discern from the Gospels and the non-biblical historical and archaeological evidence regarding the so-called lost years of Jesus' life, aside from speculation. However, it would be the teachings and miracles of his ministry, following the lost years, that would mark Jesus as no typical hard working carpenter during those years.

However, for Jesus, his vocation was not an end in itself. Nor is any other honest trade. In accordance with Jesus' use of vocations as symbols for deeper spiritual truths, work is at its best when it reflects God's kingdom to the worker and those around that worker. God is always at work in His kingdom, and if by our vocation we can learn to appreciate the lengths God goes to for us in His work, especially through His sacrifice on the cross as part of that work, then that is a vocation worth keeping. But ultimately, one's vocation is not man's highest achievement. Rather, one's appreciation of Jesus' teachings and sacrifice on the cross is. Even Jesus had to forego work to embark upon his ministry which culminated in his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. We too, in like-mindedness, must also discern the importance of Jesus in our own lives over and above our workplaces.

⁶⁶ Isaiah 5:1-7.

⁶⁷ Joel 2:19.

⁶⁸ Zechariah 8:12, 10:1.

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:6.

⁷⁰ James 1:21.