

Was Jesus a Carpenter ?

THE "*Good Carpenter of Nazareth town,*" with a deft touch when it came to yokes and crosses, is the joint creation of modern legend and the demand for the Gospel story in pictures; with, perhaps, some encouragement from the present idealisation of the craftsman, the inevitable hallucinatory compensation of an age in which craftsmanship does not pay. Certainly there is no Carpenter in ancient Christian art, nor in the flowery and verbose apocryphal Gospels.¹ Is there any foundation in fact for this nineteenth-century production ?

I.

It is not possible to quote "Mark six, three" and be done with it, because there are two versions of the resentful, rhetorical question of the Nazareth villagers. The accepted reading is :

"*Is not this the Carpenter, the Son of Mary . . . ?*" but there is a variant which goes :

"*Is not this the Son of the carpenter and of Mary . . . ?*"

To assess the rival claims of these two readings is a matter for experts; all that need concern us is that *the Son of the carpenter* establishes a very strong claim indeed to authenticity; so strong, in fact, that it is impossible on the textual evidence alone to decide which variant we must accept.

Because our minds can hardly escape a bias in favour of the familiar reading, it is worth while to glance at the claims of the less familiar.

The most ancient copy of the Gospels containing this verse of Mark, the Chester-Beatty Papyrus P⁴⁵ which comes from Egypt and dates from somewhere between 200 and 250 A.D., has *the Son of the carpenter*. The Old Latin Versions, translations which we owe to the enthusiasm of unknown Christians who wanted to make the Gospel available to the Latin-speaking population of North Africa and the Italian peasantry, were based on a Greek text current in the West before 150 A.D. They also support this reading. The renowned Origen (185-255 A.D.), who spent the first part of his life in Alexandria, and the latter part in Caesarea with its well-stocked library, adds the testimony of the

¹ It is Joseph who makes "yokes and ploughs," cf. Gospel of Thomas xi. 1.

East to that of Egypt and the West in a surprisingly blunt assertion :

*"Nowhere in the Gospels received in the Churches is Jesus Himself described as a Carpenter."*²

What the textual evidence does is not to solve but to set a problem. It brings the *Son of the carpenter* reading out of the oblivion into which it was almost universally relegated in the fifth century A.D., and gives it the status of an important witness to the true text.

But there is other evidence readily available to any one who possesses a New Testament. The earliest quotation of this disputed verse is to be found in Matthew xiii. (53). It should, I think, definitely tip the balance against the accepted reading.

It is Matthew's habit to incorporate the Marcan material in an abridged and clarified form in his Gospel. He does exactly that here, and it is plain that he has no other source except Mark on which to draw. He describes the visit to Nazareth in 98 words as against Mark's 126; yet, of those 98, 76 are lifted bodily out of Mark with only such slight modification as abridgement requires. Why, then, should Matthew write :

"Is not this the Son of the carpenter? Is not His mother called Mary?"

if he did not find it in his copy of Mark? If we assume that *Son of the carpenter* was in his text, he has merely smoothed out a clumsy collection of genitives, and avoided describing Jesus as *the Son of the carpenter and Mary*; for while the early Church accepted the description of Jesus by outsiders as *Joseph's Son*, and while to them He was *the Son of Mary*, they made a point of it that He was not the *Son of Joseph and Mary*. Matthew's delicate distinction of phrase, which introduces a gap between Joseph and Mary, is a masterly improvement on Mark's wording. But if he read the straightforward Greek of :

"Is not this the Carpenter, the Son of Mary . . . ?"

what possible reason is there for the considerable alteration he has made? He has introduced needless confusion.

Luke does not draw on Mark for his account of the visit to Nazareth, but has used an independent description which stands in a memory relation to Mark's; that is, both the Marcan and the Lucan version derive from the same item of the tradition, the variations between them being due to a different history during the period when memory was the agent of transmission. Now, in the tradition as Luke found it, the crucial word *Son* appears :

"Is not this the Son of Joseph?"

² C. Cels, VI., 36.

What, then, is the position? It is probable that the tradition from which the Marcan account of the Visit to Nazareth is ultimately derived spoke of Jesus as *the Son of* a well-known villager; the first quotation from Mark we have, which is in Matthew's Gospel, reads *the Son of the carpenter*; so do the earliest extant translations of this verse, as well as the most ancient copy of Mark to contain it and the most illustrious Biblical and textual scholar of antiquity. There is, in fact, a continuous line of corroboration from the remembered tradition right through to the fifth century, when this variant fell into oblivion because it was not adopted by the editors of the text which became standard. Even a niggardly appraisal of the evidence must admit that to build a theory that Jesus was a Carpenter on Mark vi. (3) alone is a most precarious undertaking. To the writer of this article, the testimony as a whole is sufficiently striking to justify the conclusion that in *the Son of the carpenter* we have the true text of Mark.

II.

To turn from what the Gospels say to what they imply is only to make the attempt to find a Carpenter still more hopeless.

John Oxenham no doubt relies, for his popular picture of the sympathetic Craftsman, on Justin Martyr (d. 163 A.D.) who says of Jesus:

*While He was amongst men He was engaged in the carpentry trade, making ploughs and yokes.*³

but the references⁴ on which this inference is based clearly imply a knowledge, not of the manufacture but the use of these articles: they are appropriate not to a carpenter but a farmer. Again, Canon Deane⁵ substitutes "builder" for "carpenter," and then reads first-hand acquaintance with building into the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen. The words on which he depends, however, *palisade*, *wine-press* and *tower*, are the only words in the story not original to Jesus. They are directly derived from Isaiah.

A surprising contrast to this painful irrelevance is the ease with which so many have reconstructed in colourful detail from the utterances of Jesus the home life of a Palestinian peasant, none better than Dr. T. R. Glover,⁶ with his gift of fascinating précis. But if the home in which He was brought up has left so clear an impress on Jesus' mind, it is reasonable to suppose that the years of toil that preceded the public ministry will also have left a deposit. Is it not proper to disabuse our minds of an

³ Dial: 88.

⁴ Luke ix. (62); Matt. xi. (29).

⁵ *The World Christ Knew*, pp. 83f.

⁶ *The Jesus of History*, pp. 27f.

exaggerated dogma and ask, "Do the sayings and parables reflect a coherent background parallel with that of the cottage home?" The answer is that they do.

The sun and the rain chequer the countryside; at times a storm swells, and the jagged lightning falls sharply from a cloudy pinnacle. Flowers pattern the foreground; a fig-tree offers its welcome shade and sparrows chatter in and out of the mustard bush. Sheep crop the grass; goats ruminates their sinister purposes; a hen clucks her chickens under her wings; the ox waits patiently for its yoke; and a group of men, with excited shouting, lift an injured ass from an empty well shaft, Sabbath or no Sabbath. Somewhere swine are grunting and a dog barks.

In the near distance the corn, ripe for harvesting, proclaims the fruitful soil, and ravens solemnly seize their share of the crops. The lower slopes of the hills are bright green with vineyards, where the squat watch-tower can be clearly seen. Further up the hills the foxes have their holes, vipers dart between the rocks, and, when night falls, the wolf prowls for his prey.

Across this panorama move the changing seasons with their varied toil; the plough-man draws his furrow, the sower scatters his seed, one shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, while, out on the uplands, another doggedly seeks the lost member of his flock, scanning the skies fearfully to see if the vultures are gathering to the sharp scent of death. From field and vineyard, at harvest-time, comes the repeated cry for more help, and the farmer hurries into the town morning, noon and night to seek extra hands for the urgent task, pausing between to discuss with a trusted servant the fate of one of his trees.

The sweating toiler comes in from the fields, perhaps to snatch a bite of bread with unwashed hands before cleaning himself up to wait at table. A bailiff moves in and out of the picture, a man with a brain as cold as ice. The farmer's sons can be seen, one moodily idling, another doomed to the fatal attraction of the city's noise and movement. There is talk of a drunken foreman bullying his fellow employees in his master's absence, and of trouble in the vineyard over rates of pay.

Darkness settles on storehouse and granary to the cooing of doves, the heavy odour of the dung-heap mingling with the acrid smell of burning weeds. Over the solemn landscape tinkles the incongruous sound of distant feasting; and, purposeful, through the shadows, flits the Angel of death.

It is axiomatic that whatever figure rises naturally against this re-constructed background will be Jesus Himself. And the figure that does so take shape is not a carpenter with a saw, but a labourer with a spade.

Jesus is completely at home in this scene; He is intimate with its details; He has the comprehensive insight of a workman who has reached an understanding with the materials of his trade. The cogent simplicity and artistic purity of the parables are the chief evidence of this grip, but it is just their effortless lucidity which hides it from us. Yet it compels attention when, for example, the parable of the lost sheep is contrasted with the allegory of Ezekiel xxxiv (2ff). With Ezekiel men in sheep's clothing are maltreated by tyrants thinly disguised as shepherds; but in Jesus's story the sheep are real, the shepherd is actual. It repeats the lyric miracle of the twenty-third Psalm.

Such intimacy is of the first importance for distinguishing between an intelligent onlooker and one with first-hand experience. Of necessity, the evidence for it is cumulative. That it runs right through the Gospels the re-construction attempted above should substantiate. But three further examples of it may be given.

First, there is the sustained knowledge, the very opposite of casual or external information, out of which the parable of the sower is drawn:

And some fell on stony ground where it did not have much soil; and it shot up at once, because there was no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered.⁷

Second, could there be a more succinct summary of the whole agricultural process, yet more masterly in its compression than:

The earth grows crops by itself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.⁸

Third, there is the parable of the tares. There is here an analogy unlikely to occur to any one without a personal acquaintance with the problem it describes:

"Do you want us to go and pull them out?"

"No," he said, "in case by pulling out the tares you root up the corn as well. Let them both grow together until harvest. When harvest comes I will tell the harvesters: 'Collect the tares first and bind them in bundles for burning; then fetch the corn into the barn.'"⁹

⁷ Mark iv. (5, 6).

⁸ Mark iv. (28).

⁹ Matt. xiii. (28ff.)

Which is precisely what a good farmer would order to this day, including the burning!

It is important also to notice how naturally this agricultural background lies in the stories. The rich fool did not have to be a farmer, but he was :

"What shall I do? I have nowhere to put my crops."

*"I will do this," he said, "I will pull down my barns, and build bigger ones, and in them I will store my produce and my goods."*¹⁰

The prodigal was a farmer's son, not the first or the last younger son on a farm to be a problem child. When destitute he took a job on a farm; and the father, in the excitement of the welcome, forgot that *his elder son was in the field*. Any excuses, obviously, would have done to fob off the *servant of the man who was giving a large supper*; it is significant that two of them are natural only to farmers :

*"I have bought a field, and I must go and look at it."*¹¹

and

*"I have bought five pair of oxen and I am going to try them out."*¹²

Even into the unsuitable atmosphere of the parable of the Pounds, with which the servants were ordered *to trade*, this same background obtrudes. The defence of the unprofitable servant is couched in terms of agriculture, not trade :

*"I was afraid of you, you are such a hard man, picking up what you never put down, reaping what you never sowed."*¹³

This re-inforces the view that Jesus's mind had been so impregnated with the life of the farming community that its talk and affairs were the unchanging background of His thought.

The whole argument is strengthened further by the fact that, when Jesus seeks a sudden analogy, what comes to His lips is some experience or phrase natural to a worker on the land. Savourless salt is *no use for either soil or dunghill; it is flung out*.¹⁴ Peter is warned *Satan has asked for you, to sift you like wheat*.¹⁵ Each generation in turn is arrested by the sharp *he who does not gather with Me scatters*,¹⁶ and the dignified, generous challenge *take My yoke upon you and learn of Me*.¹⁷ It is clear that Jesus seizes on some simile from weather-signs or plough, sheep or foxes, sowing

¹⁰ Luke xii. (17, 18).

¹¹ Luke xiv. (18).

¹² Luke xiv. (19).

¹³ Luke xix. (21) Moffatt.

¹⁴ Luke xiv. (35) Moffatt.

¹⁵ Luke xxii. (31).

¹⁶ Luke xi. (23).

¹⁷ Matt. xi. (29).

or harvest for the apt utterance and the unanswerable reply. And why not, if through such experience His mind had been disciplined, and in such experiences lay stored up His wisdom?

Since, then, Jesus moves naturally across field and farm, how are we to say He was occupied in them? Here two other features of His stories and sayings spring to mind, the constant reference to servants and the continual introduction of the "big house." It is just as possible to deduce from Jesus's words the life of a busy farm, with its owner, his sons, the hired servants and the slaves as it is that of the cottage. There is something almost poignant in Jesus's references to servants; it is possible to see the tired labourer coming in from the fields only to have to tidy himself up to wait at table before he can satisfy his own hunger; and, in contrast, that memorable night when the master came back from a wedding, and, in his delight at finding his servants ready at the first knock, made them sit down and actually waited on them himself. True also to the servant's perspective is the shrewd comment on the bailiff and his black-coated type:

*"I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed."*¹⁸

Perhaps the gem of all the miniatures of country life in the Gospels is the solemn discussion about the fate of the fig-tree;¹⁹ the owner maintaining his dignity, it is true; but the "hand" deferentially getting his own way with the tree in which his labour had been invested.

A hired servant on a big farm would show just such intimacy with agriculture, the life of a busy estate and the worker's point of view which have been described. Had Jesus spent His youth and early manhood in such a job the whole of the material to which attention has been drawn falls naturally into place. And a close reading of the Gospels does suggest that Jesus also knew something from the servant's end about feasts, and bullying foremen, and crafty bailiffs, and masters, good and bad. Jesus also seems to have had a first-hand acquaintance with dirty jobs. He speaks of an integrity that is impervious to their taint. The discussion on what is defiling and the act of foot-washing are not unconnected; and there is a finality in

*"Eating with unwashed hands does not defile a man,"*²⁰

that sounds as if it might have been learned by a hungry, underfed youth who had snatched a piece of bread on coming in from a hard day in the fields before he had got rid of what a worker still calls his "dirt."

¹⁸ Luke xvi. (3).

¹⁹ Luke xiii. (6ff).

²⁰ Matt. xv. (20).

III.

And now for a little guessing, guessing sharply controlled, however, by the facts which have been presented.

Where there is a house full of children, a small business can rarely afford to absorb more than one worker. As soon as the eldest son is old enough to be something more than "father's helper" he becomes a luxury a small craftsman cannot afford. One less mouth to feed, and perhaps something, however small, in cash or extras into the bargain, these are considerations which soon drive the eldest boy out to work and promote the next son to his job in the workshop. It is therefore very unlikely that Jesus would have entered His father's business. But did Jesus ever have the chance to become a carpenter? The probability is that Joseph died before Jesus was old enough to take over the business. What would a "poor woman with a carpenter's little brood to bring up"²¹ do with her eldest son? As likely as not she would send him out to work as a hired boy on an estate. He would be fed, and there would be something, surely, to help her out with the others.

There is a firm tradition that the grandchildren of Jesus's brother Judas were small farmers. Eusebius (264-340 A.D.) the first historian of the Church, says that they were brought before Domitian as possible pretenders to the kingship of Judea, but defended themselves by explaining that :

*They had between them only 9,000 denarii, and this they had, not in silver, but in the value of a piece of land containing only thirty-nine acres, from which they raised their taxes and supported themselves by their own labour.*²²

It is tempting to suppose that this land may have entered the family through Jesus, representing His accumulated savings; what the story does at least show is that there was an inclination to farming in the family, enough to make the suggestion that Jesus took to it in the family's difficulties plausible.

It is well known that Jesus had connections with Judea with which His Galilean followers were unfamiliar. His intimate followers had to be given secret signs by which to recognise or be recognised by those Judean associates of Jesus who provided the ass for the Triumphal Entry²³ and the room for the Last Supper.²⁴ How extensive was this connection with Judea the Gospel of John indicates. It is possible that the greater part of the "hidden years" were spent out of Galilee in Judea. This would explain why tradition knows nothing of them; Jesus did not speak of them, and it would be natural that His followers who, with one

²¹ T. R. Glover; *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²² Eus. H. E. iii. 20.

²³ Mark xi. (3).

²⁴ Mark xiv. (13).

tragic exception, were Galileans, should therefore be ignorant of how they were spent. In addition, considering the fact that Joseph had completely dropped out of the picture by the time of the public ministry, it is strange that the Nazareth villagers should have described Jesus by the other members of the family and the dead father. This is not nearly so strange if He had spent many years away from the village before returning, only to leave again on His mission.

We are left then, not with a Carpenter, a man who was his own master, but with a hired Servant, who learned to speak of ministering through the heavy discipline of being at another's beck and call; with One who had done many a messy job, and not suffered a whit; who had learned a deep wisdom from the medium through which He earned His daily bread; and who, perhaps, had worked His way until He had achieved a small measure of independence, which He immediately sacrificed at the call of His Father. The background of the teaching, neither neglected nor forced into an alien mould, tells a luminous story of the years that preceded the sudden ministry, the clouded cross, and the blaze of the resurrection. Paul hid an intimate reading of Jesus's character behind 1 Cor. xiii. Has this Jerusalem trained convert hidden more than a quotation from Isaiah liii. behind Philippians ii. (7) *taking the form of a servant?*

But the story ends in neither Carpenter nor Servant. It must press forward to the triumphant conclusion:

Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

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