

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## The Family Business at Nazareth.

WE owe much to the microscopic study of words in the Gospels, and the patient labour of those who, like T. R. Glover and L. H. Jenkins, reconstruct from them a tessellated pavement depicting a mode of life shattered in the days of Josephus, yet revived in a generation, and still to be seen in its broad outline. A further contribution is here offered, as to the industries of Joseph.

When Jesus was about thirty years old, His neighbours at Nazareth were astonished at "the carpenter's son" breaking out in a new line (Matt. xiii. 55). Joseph was not a mere village craftsman, for down at Capernaum others said: "We know his father and mother" (John vi. 42). It would seem that Joseph's reputation was more than local, and that he was living recently. The latter point has not been generally recognised, and has been blunted by the supposition that he was old when he married; a mere guess to support a movement to exalt virginity.

Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem every Passover (Luke ii. 41). It is highly probable that Jesus did the same after He was twelve. In eighteen years He must have gained a fair acquaintance with lodging-house keepers, and made friends near, as at Bethany and Bethphage. It seems needless to suppose He ever resided in Judæa; Zachariah and Elizabeth were old before He was born, and their son lived in the deserts (Luke i. 80).

Joseph was a carpenter. To that craft Jesus made two allusions; that His yoke was easy (Matt. xi. 30) and that a speck of sawdust in the eye could impair vision (Matt. vii. 3-5). Before Jesus was thirty years old, Joseph was *the* carpenter (Matt. xiii. 55), the leading craftsman in the town. Now, is it not likely that an eldest son would more naturally follow the same craft than devote himself to a side-line?

Jesus was certainly a good observer. His stories and illustrations reveal much acquaintance with small farming, as has been admirably shown. Yet there are two puzzles, an illustration and an incident. Is a mustard-seed the smallest of seeds? Does it grow into a tree on whose branches the birds perch? (Matt. xiii. 32). Doubtless Jesus did not mind humorous exaggerations, as to a wooden beam in the eye, a camel passing through the eye of a needle; but this seems not of their class. Again, on a morning walk, Jesus was hungry, and when He saw a fig tree in leaf, He turned aside to see if it had any fruit; Mark, another

townsman, knew that the time of figs had not come (xi. 13). If Jesus had been a small farmer, would He have had such an unreasonable expectation?

Examine the epithet Carpenter, first to see if it is an adequate translation. With us it is clearly limited to a worker in wood, and others have pointed out that the Greek word has no such limitation. Consider architecture in Palestine, and we find that wood is a rare material. When Solomon needed cedars, he had to import them from Lebanon. At the other end of the scale, it was used for boats on the lake of Galilee, and for rafters on a fisherman's hut (Mark ii. 4). But the standard material has always been stone, which is abundant. Not only walls, but roofs and doors are of stone. The suggestion is therefore made that Joseph worked in this also, as a mason; that if he had put up a sign or presented a bill, it might have read Carpenter and Builder. Test this by the vocabulary of Jesus.

Foundations were much in His thought. The climax of the sermon on the mount was a contrast between rock and sand whereon to build (Matt. vii. 25). When Simon was brought to Jesus by his brother, he was hailed by a new name, Cephas, Rock (John i. 42). That idea is connected with the later leap of faith when Cephas recognised Jesus as the Messiah, Son of the living God. Jesus declared that on that rock He would build His Church (Matt. xvi. 16-18). A story about laying out a vineyard includes the irrelevant detail that a tower was built (Matt. xxi. 33). Another story is of barns to be pulled down and replaced by larger (Luke xii. 18). A third is of a tower whose expense outran the means of the man who commissioned it (Luke xiv. 28); had Joseph lost over such a contract? Jesus spoke also of building tombs (Matt. xxiii. 29), and quoted about the topmost stone being laid (Matt. xxi. 42). A garbled utterance as to a temple being rebuilt in three days (Matt. xxvi. 61) may reflect some hasty employer trying to hustle Joseph. Bad workmanship was noted, as of the tower of Siloam which fell and caused many deaths (Luke xiii. 4); magnificent buildings to which His attention was called elicited a dirge over their total destruction, which He foresaw (Mark xiii.). He thought not only of one-room huts, but of a mansion with many rooms which He would finish to suit every occupant (John xiv. 2). While such allusions point to familiarity with work on a large scale, we find also that once with some friends He was a guest at a home in Cana where were six waterpots of stone (John ii. 6); had they come from the family workshop? First Jesus, then Mary, gave orders to the servants without reference to the bridegroom or the steward: their reputation must have stood high. When we look down to the lake, we find Mary's sister (John xix. 25 and Matt. xxvii. 56),

the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Her residence there may have attracted Jesus to the fishing centre rather than the capital; indeed, there may have been some idea of a branch establishment to specialise in boat-building. In any case, we get a picture of a business known far beyond the inland town of Nazareth, able to engross the attention of Mary's five sons.

Two of these brothers afterwards left short writings, James a formal pastoral and an official decision on a crucial question; Jude a hasty tract. Their writings throw no further light on the business at Nazareth.

Since Jesus committed Mary to the care of her nephew John (xix. 26, 27), He probably foresaw the collapse of the business. Priests who were vindictive and clever enough to ruin the Nazarene lodging-house keepers at Jerusalem (Acts iv. 34-37, vi. 1), would not lose sight of the valuable asset in Galilee. When the storm of rebellion subsided, leaving priests with no temple and no revenue, the Pharisees became the leaders; they chose Tiberias as a headquarters to protect from the Nazarene heresy, It is not surprising that the family business simply vanished, and that the heads relapsed into becoming small farmers like Amos.

But the eldest of the five brothers had prepared them for a new valuation, to lay up their treasure not on earth but in heaven, where their hearts would be also. When He gave Himself in Jordan to a new life, He went wholly about His true Father's business. He chose and trained helpers, first members of a select body, the Church, His partner, to gather material of all kinds, tractable as wood, durable as stone, for building into a palace where He would prepare a home for each who continued His work here. Nearly the last whom He thus converted to the noblest of purposes was His own brother (I. Cor. xv. 7). James rose above Nazareth and its workshop when he wrote at large as bondservant of Jesus as Lord, and owned that His brother had saved his life (i. 1; v. 20).

Such is the true business of every member of the great family of our Father.

W. T. WHITLEY.