WAS JESUS A CARPENTER?

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Jesus is usually said to have been a carpenter. This assertion is based chiefly upon a single passage in the Gospel of St. Mark (vi, 3), where the people listening to his preaching in the synagogue in “his own country,” were astonished and cried: “What is the wisdom that is given unto this man, and what mean such mighty works wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” Taken by itself this text is by no means decisive, for it is not a statement that Jesus was a carpenter, but merely that his auditors called him such, and they might have been mistaken or inaccurate. If we turn to the parallel passage in the Gospel of St. Matthew, we find an almost identical account of the same episode. “And coming into his own country he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? is not his mother called Mary?” (Mat. xiii, 54–5.) The two phrases, “Is not this the carpenter?” and “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” are clearly variations of what was historically a single question, and in the original Greek they are equally similar: οἶχον ὁ ὑπὸ ητίνι ὁ τέκτων; and οἶχον ὁ ὑπό ητίνι ὁ τοῦ τέκτωνος νύμος. The people evidently made one of these remarks and not the other, and the difference is due to the error of one of the recorders. Which version is the more likely to be correct? It is impossible for us to determine, but it is at least just as probable that the designation of “carpenter” was applied to his father as to himself, and we must still consider the question of his calling an open one. There is a passage in the Gospel of St. John which seems to have been derived from the same source, and it reads as follows: “And they said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?’” Here the words, “the son of Joseph,” might be regarded as a paraphrase of the words, “the carpenter’s son,” which would make this reading of St. Matthew’s appear to be the most authentic, and if this conclusion be correct, all proof of the fact that Jesus was a carpenter would disappear from the Gospels.

The word τέκτων which is correctly translated in our versions of the New Testament as “carpenter,” has etymologically a somewhat broader meaning, denoting any kind of craftsman, the same root appearing in our word “architect,” which comes from the Greek ἀρχιτέκτων, a master-craftsman. In the time of Jesus it undoubtedly designated any worker in wood,—cabinet-maker, wood-carver, or builder as the case might be,—but it must be borne in mind that practically all the houses of Palestine were built of stone, that material being very plentiful, while timber was rare. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century, refers in his “Dialogue with Trypho” to the trade of Jesus. “And when Jesus came to the Jor-
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dan,” he says, “he was considered to be the son of Joseph the carpenter, . . . 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).” (Chapter 88.) In the absence of other confirmatory evidence this passage does not seem to be conclusive. The phrase “he was deemed a carpenter;” suggests uncertainty on the part of the writer, and the imputation of symbolism to the mechanical work of Jesus has a certain fantastic air which would tend to classify the story with the legends of the apocryphal Gospels. The four canonical Evangelists make no further allusion to his trade or occupation. They pass over his life from his early infancy until his thirtieth year; in a few words, and it does not appear that during the period of his ministry he engaged in any manual labor, or at any rate if he did, the fact is not mentioned.

Let us turn from these unsatisfactory proofs to the internal evidence afforded by the words of Jesus himself. His discourses, conversations and observations have been preserved in great fullness as recorded by various hearers, and we may be sure that we have a quite complete compendium of his entire thought as expressed in language. Let us examine the Gospels and read his sayings with the hope of extracting from them some hints of the work which he was accustomed to perform, day after day, during his youth and early manhood. And we are surprised first of all not to find a single word which points to either carpentry or to any handicraft whatever. He shows deep familiarity with almost every other phase of life: domestic, commercial, professional, agricultural; for no man ever entered more fully into the daily routine of existence around him and reflected it more vividly in his every utterance. How often he may have seen his mother hide the leaven in three measures of meal! and how clearly the use of the definite number “three” gives the color of an actual experience to the parable! And so he speaks of “two” women grinding, and we find the same precision in the story of the man who comes to his neighbor’s house at midnight, and cries: “Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him.” Jesus had seen children asking their fathers for bread, and he takes this commonest of foods as a symbol of himself: “I am the bread of life.” He speaks familiarly of the household supplies and articles: of salt, and candles and bushel-measures; of the mending of clothes and the washing of cups and platters; and when he tells us of the woman who called in her friends to rejoice with her after she had found the lost piece of silver, we may well suppose that he is recalling some actual event. Nothing in the home life of his own family or of his friends escaped him, and all that he observed was impressed upon his mind so that he could use it as occasion offered in parable and metaphor.

He shows an acquaintance also with the mercantile life of towns; he tells of the merchant seeking pearls, of bankers and money-lenders and usurers, and he knows the price of sparrows in the market: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?” (Mat. x, 29.) “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings?” (Luke xii, 6.) He speaks of judges and officers of the law, and of
physicians. He has seen children playing in the market-place, and Pharisees praying at the street corners and in the Temple, and he remembers the details of feasts and weddings, the order of the guests at table, and the style of garment required. He can use for illustration the sepulchres on the hillside, the wars of kings of which he has read, or the latest tale of robbery, either of the highwayman or of the burglar who breaks through (or rather “digs through”), and steals.

But of all this nothing seems as yet to suggest a regular occupation on the part of Jesus. Such callings as have been referred to by him so far are evidently looked at from the outside. The references are those of an observer and not of an actor. When we turn however to his allusions to the rural world of corn-field and vineyard and sheepfold, we seem to enter a new region of which he speaks with the technical knowledge of an expert. With what particularity he details the incidents of the sower’s day’s work! Nothing could be more certain than that Jesus had often sown seed himself and seen the birds devour that which fell by the wayside, and had watched the fortunes of the crop from day to day, and noted how the sun scorched the blades which came up in rocky places, “because they had no deepness of earth,” and how they withered away, “because they had no root;” and how the thorns choked the seed that fell among them. And he knew exactly how much that which fell in good ground should yield: “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” When tares grow in a field, he was aware that it is best not to attempt to root them out, but to wait until the harvest and then to say to the reapers: “Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles and burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.” And he had often watched with wonder the miracle of the growth of grain, which, while the farmer goes about his duties, springs up and grows, “he knoweth not how.” And he had followed the fate of the “grass of the field,” “which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven” as fuel. He knows that the “mustard-seed” is the smallest of seeds, and he has seen the birds light in the branches of the tree which springs from it. He has remarked the fowls of the air, and their nests: the sparrows, the eagles feeding on carrion, the fox and his hole, and the lily of the field. He has lived out of door and studied the action of sun and rain and lightning: he knows that a cloud rising in the West portends a shower, and a south wind scorching heat, and that when the fig-trees shoot forth, summer is nigh at hand. He has seen oxen and asses watered on the Sabbath, and has probably done it himself. They are “loosed” from the stall and led away to watering. He is conversant with the custom which, when the servant comes in from plowing, requires him first to prepare his master’s supper. Jesus knows well the great estates of the rich with their stewards and overseers, and it is such products of husbandry as oil and wheat which formed the debts reduced by the “unjust steward.” He knows well the rich man who builds great barns and fills them with his crops, when his soul is required of him. Country sights of all kinds furnish him with ready images: the man who puts his hand to the plough and turns back, the treasure found in the field, the ox or the ass fallen into the well. He appears also
to have had some knowledge of fishing, and of the way in which the fishermen draw the net up on the beach, and throw away the bad fish while they gather the good into vessels, and when he advises Peter at their first meeting where to cast his net, the result is successful.

No less marked is the familiarity of Jesus with fruit-culture. A fig-tree which has not borne fruit for several years must be dug about and fertilized. A good tree brings forth good fruit, and a corrupt tree evil fruit, and the latter must be hewn down. Men do not gather grapes of thorns nor figs of thistles. Jesus knows how laborers are hired in the marketplace to work in vineyards, and how a man employs his own sons in such work, and he tells a parable of a householder who planted a vineyard and set a hedge about it, and dug a wine-press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen. He likens himself to a vine. Vine-branches that bear no fruit are taken away, while those that bear are cleansed so that they may bear more, and the withered branches are burned. The new wine must be put into new leathern bottles, as it would burst old bottles.

Jesus also shows special knowledge of the duties of a shepherd. A sheep may be lifted out of a pit on the Sabbath. He is himself the good shepherd. The porter of the sheepfold opens the door to the shepherd, but the robber climbs up some other way. The sheep recognize their shepherd's voice, and he calls them by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own sheep, leaving behind those of the other shepherds, he goes before them and they follow him, for they know his voice. But they will flee from a stranger, because they do not know his voice. He likens himself, too, to the door of the fold. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep, if they are his own sheep, but a mere hireling runs away from the wolf, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. When the owner of an hundred sheep loses one, he leaves all the rest and searches for the lost one in the mountains until he finds it, and then he rejoices over it more than over the other ninety-nine. Jesus sends his disciples forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, and he warns them against false prophets which come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves, and he tells how shepherds separate the sheep from the goats.

We have now given a fairly complete résumé of the references which Jesus makes to the popular life around him. It is wonderful what a living picture we can construct from it of the society of his time. Only one feature is absent,—almost totally absent,—and that is any hint of craftsmanship of any kind. In one place he speaks of the two men who built houses on the rock and on the sand, but not a single detail of the construction is given. It is the fall of the house on the sand which is described, and how the rain descended and the floods came and the wind blew and smote upon that house. All his attention is fixed on the work of nature. In another place he tells of the building of a tower, but he only refers to it for the purpose of dwelling upon the necessity of counting the cost beforehand, lest it be left unfinished. It is certainly astounding that whatever his occupation, Jesus never alludes to the work of an artificer. A carpenter's trade offers almost as many opportunities for parable and
parallel as the farmer’s. The difference in the fibre of woods, the seasoning of timber and its warping, the use of the various tools, the adaptation of the parts of the article manufactured to the whole,—surely here was a field worth cultivating! Is it not inconceivable that Jesus should have been a craftsman and yet have failed to say one word of his craft? His mind seems to have turned almost invariably to the world of the farm for his similes; the scenes of farm life were always haunting him, and he recurred to them with evident affection. Even the excuses given by the wedding-guests were agricultural excuses: “I have bought a field, and I must needs go out and see it,” “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them.” It is noticeable in this connection that Justin Martyr ascribes to Jesus the trade of making yokes and ploughs, both of them agricultural implements. If this really was his occupation, it would give additional interest to his injunction: “Take my yoke upon you, . . . for my yoke is easy,” but if he had intended to speak of his trade he would hardly have added the irrelevant phrase, “and my burden is light,” as the burden drawn by the yoke was not manufactured by the maker of the yoke. The carpenters of Nazareth to-day make little miniature yokes and ploughs which are sold to pilgrims and travelers, and I possess one of each which I bought there some years since. They have taken their idea from Justin Martyr.

In only one place do we find Jesus confronted with craftsmanship or with plastic arts in any form, and that was when he was going forth from the Temple at Jerusalem, and “some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and offerings” (that is, votive offerings), or said to him, as it is given in another Gospel: “Master, behold, what manner of stones and what manner of buildings!” But Jesus does not express any admiration. “Seest thou these great buildings?” he says. “There shall not be left here one stone upon another which shall not be thrown down.” That this temple of Herod was a most magnificent building we learn from the writings of Josephus. Mr. James Ferguson, a competent authority, concludes in his description of it that “it must have formed, when combined with the beauty of the situation, one of the most splendid architectural combinations of the ancient world.” It seems safe then to infer that Jesus was indifferent to architecture and to craftsmanship generally. I have looked through the “logia” of Jesus (that is, the sayings attributed to him on good authority, but not contained in the Gospels), and have only succeeded in finding in one of them any reference, direct or indirect, to handicraft. Resch, in his “Agraphe” (Leipzig, 1889) gives sixty-two fairly authentic sayings of this kind, but none of them is to the point. In the winter of 1896-7, however, a manuscript, dating probably from the third century, was discovered in Egypt by Messrs. Grenfell and Hunt of the Egypt Exploration Fund, which contained among other “logia” the following sentence, “Jesus saith:” (and then follow some undecipherable words) “Raise the stone and there thou shalt find me, cleave the wood and there am I.” The authenticity of this text is exceedingly doubtful, but it should be taken into consideration in determining whether Jesus was a carpenter or not.

The conclusion to which I am disposed to
come is that Jesus was not a carpenter, and that if his father ever was one, he had ceased to ply his trade before Jesus was old enough to pay attention to his work; for otherwise the early impressions of the craft would have impressed themselves upon his mind. The tradition, in fact is, that Joseph was a very old man and that he died while Jesus was still a lad. It seems pretty certain on the other hand that Jesus had earned his living in agriculture, vine-dressing and sheep-raising, so that not only were all the details of these occupations at his fingers' ends, but they afforded him with the rich stock of illustrations upon which he was accustomed to draw. The Jews have never been preëminent as craftsmen, for which fact the proscription of graven images may be in part responsible, and the idea of "joy in work," as presented by Ruskin and Morris is peculiarly Western and modern. That Jesus was an artist from the literary point of view, no one who reads the parable of the "Prodigal Son" can doubt, but in the world of the senses it was nature, and not art, that attracted him. He had no taste for craftsmanship, and it is altogether unlikely that he ever was a craftsman. From his cradle in the manger of the oxen to his tomb in a "garden" (κήπως, orchard or plantation), his life savored of the soil and of its primary and essential travail.

AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN WHOM SIMPLE TASTES AND SUSCEPTIBILITY TO ALL THE GREAT HUMAN INFLUENCES, OVERPOWER THE ACCIDENTS OF A LOCAL AND SPECIAL CULTURE, IS THE BEST CRITIC OF ART. THOUGH WE TRAVEL THE WORLD OVER TO FIND THE BEAUTIFUL, WE MUST CARRY IT WITH US, OR WE FIND IT NOT.

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