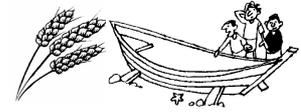


The world of Jesus- Life in 1st. century Palestine study 5 Life: Agriculture, Fishing...and Taxes!!



How to make a living

There were basically three ways for a man to make his living in 1st. century Palestine.

1. Agriculture
2. Fishing
3. Craftsman i.e. working with wood, metal, clay, leather etc.

AGRICULTURE

This was by far and away the main occupation of Jews in the time of Jesus and of course not limited simply to men, as the whole community would be involved on occasions such as harvest-time. It is estimated that as much as 80%-90% of the population were engaged in agricultural work, in direct contrast to the so-called cultured and educated Greco-Roman world, where leisure and enjoyment were the ideal. Galilee was especially fertile and Josephus speaks of it being cultivated from one end to the other. And yet the land (or more precisely the farming techniques) were not hugely productive, yielding only a 10%-15% return on the seed sown – hence the impact of Jesus' parable about the productiveness of the seed of the Kingdom in Mt.13v8,23.

Deut.8v8 identifies the "Seven Kinds" of agricultural produce for which the country was famed: wheat; barley; vines; fig trees; pomegranates; olive trees; honey.

The Bosses

Above the peasants were the 5% elite – soldiers, administrators, priests, rulers, who had to be fed and clothed by the labouring classes.

And those who worked the land were not free to decide what was planted on the land. Increasingly land was held by big and powerful (absentee cf Mt.25v14f) landowners, whose prime concern was to increase their surplus (Lk.12v18), or to grow cash crops (Lk.13v9), and see Isa.5v8 and see Jn.4v37. No wonder the way in which peace, prosperity and liberty was envisaged was in terms of being free to cultivate one's own piece of land, free from any outside interference! It was said of the rule of Simon Maccabee that: *He restored peace to the land..Each man sat under his own vine and fig-tree and they had no-one to fear* (I Macc.14v11-12)

It is estimated that the elite families may have received as least 25% of the *national* product and probably 50% and may be up to 66% (i.e. 2/3).
e.g. Herod the Great required 25% - 33% of all the grain within his kingdom and 50% of all the products of fruit trees.

Jesus

It is no surprise that so many of Jesus' parables and analogies revolve around agriculture, whether that be the sower going out to sow (Mt.13v1ff), or the weeds hidden in the field (Mt.13v24-30), or the growing seed (Mk.4v26-29), or the mustard seed (Mk.4v30-32), or the harvest at the end of the age (Mt.13v39), or the fields being white for harvest (Jn. 4v35-38), or of the harvest being plentiful but the labourers few (Lk.10v2).

FISHING

Fishing was an important part of the Palestinian economy, both for internal consumption but also for export. In the feeding miracles we see that bread and dried fish were a staple diet. However, like agriculture, this was equally tightly controlled [see: Galilean Fishing Economy]. The local ruler, be that king or Roman prefect, held the fishing rights, which they in turn leased to "Brokers", who in turn leased those rights to the local fishermen at high rates. Consequently most fishermen would be in debt to these tax-collectors and this was probably part of Matthew's profession as he sat in his tax booth in Capernaum, a customs post and a centre of trade for fish (Mt.9v9; Mk.2v1,13-14; Lk.5v27-28).

These fishermen might form co-operatives to increase efficiency and to help off-set the expenses of leasing the fishing rights and they might also employ others. And this is exactly what we find in the Gospels, where Peter and Andrew are in partnership with James and John and where Zebedee also employs others in the business (Mt.4v18-22; Mk.1v16-20; Lk.5v1-11).

The fishing industry had three parts to it:

1. Catching the fish
2. Processing the fish (smoked, pickled, dried, salted).
3. Distributing the fish

And some fishing families (including Zebedee's?) seem to have combined more than one of these elements in their business, for we find John known to the High-Priest's household in Jerusalem (Jn.18v15-16). Perhaps the most logical explanation of this would be that it was John who oversaw the delivery of dried fish straight from "Zebedee and sons" to the High-Priest's table.

The significance of the fishing industry to the economy of Palestine is illustrated in certain place names. Jerusalem had a *Fish Gate* (Neh.3v3), whilst Bethsaida on the northern shore of Lake Galilee, means literally *House of Fishing* i.e. *Fishing Village*. Magdala (from whence came Mary Magdalene), which was on the western shore of Lake Galilee, means *Tower* but it also had a Greek name which meant *Processed Fish Town!*

Archaeological discoveries show that the typical Galilean fishing vessel had a sail and space for four to row and one to steer. The boats were large enough to take over a ton weight in catch – so think of how many fish there must have been to threaten to sink two of these vessels (Lk.5v6-7)! – or up to ten passengers.

Jesus

Unsurprisingly we see Jesus using fishing in His teaching (Mt.7v10; Lk.11v11; Mt.13v47-50) and in His (re)-calling of the first disciples to *become fishers of men* Mt.4v19; Mk.1v17; Lk.5v10; Jn.21v4-6).

“PAYING TAXES TO CAESAR” (Mt.22v17; Mk.12v14; Lk.20v22)

It has been estimated that Judea was one of the most heavily taxed provinces of the Roman Empire. Around the death of Herod the Great and assuming a working male population of 250,000, it meant that the average man was working three weeks a year for the state, a serious matter when most people lived at subsistence level.

There were four types of direct taxation (three civil and one religious):

- Land Tax (*tributum soli*)

The bulk of tribute owed to Rome was collected in the form of perhaps a 10% tax on the produce of the land. Tenant farmers paid indirectly through rent, whilst in Jerusalem, the inhabitants paid a property tax and there was a city sales tax. This Land Tax was fixed in advance, so a poor harvest or individual insolvency created immediate and great hardship.

- Poll Tax (*tributum capitas*), which was assessed through a census of the population and was probably one denarius i.e. a day's wage.

In Syria men had to pay the poll tax from age 14 – 65 and women from age 12-65.

Both these direct taxes were collected annually through councils of Jewish leaders, who were resented as being collaborators with Rome.

- Customs Duties

There would be tax offices at ports and outside city gates (Mk.2v14), taking between 2% and 5% of the value of the produce in tax. However it was up to the customs official to decide the value of the commodity and on a long journey, merchandise might be taxed several times as it passed not just from country to country but from province to province.

The basic system for collecting Customs Duties was to subcontract them to businessmen, who in turn employed others to raise the required revenue. These businessmen had expended a considerable amount in gaining the contract in the first place (cf Mt.18v23-24), all of which they needed to recoup. They also wanted to make a profit, as well as ensuring that they were covered for lean years. Consequently corruption and exploitation were rife to which John the Baptist and a chief tax collector in Jericho testify (Lk.3v12-13; Lk.19v8).

These tax farmers were hated by the population for their dishonesty and rapaciousness. The rabbis said that any house into which a tax collector entered became religiously "unclean" and indeed that it was not a sin to lie to robbers and to tax collectors!

Tax collectors were routinely linked with prostitutes (Mt.21v31-32) and “sinners” (Mk.2v15; Lk.15v1 and were an example of the lowest of the low (Mt.5v46; 18v17). Rabbis likened them to robbers and the Romans to brothel keepers! Hence the *immense* scandal of Jesus eating and drinking with such people and of His presenting a penitent tax collector as being justified before God at the expense of a “righteous” Pharisee” (Lk.18v9-14)!

- The half shekel Temple tax

This was for the upkeep and ministry of the Temple (Ex.30v11-16) and was clearly still the practice in Jesus’ day (Mt.17v24-27). It was meant to be paid annually by every male of 20 years and over, living in Israel or in the Diaspora and whether rich or poor (Ex.30v14-15). The only exception was the priests. A half shekel was roughly the equivalent of a denarius i.e. a day’s wage (Mt.20v2).

DEBT

Because of high taxation levels and a relatively unproductive economic system and because of the rise of the landed classes at the expense of the peasant, debt became a real issue for many. The rise in banditry recorded by Josephus may in part be a direct result of this enforced poverty.

Jesus was no stranger to the economic realities of life as His parables illustrate. He tells a story of two men in debt to a money lender (Lk.7v40-43); the two servants owing a huge sum and a small sum (Mt.18v23f); and of a shrewd manager reducing debts owed to his master (Lk.16v1f). He advises His listeners to settle up quickly with their creditors before they get to court (Mt.5v25-26; Lk.12v58-59).

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

Jesus was raised in a small village in Galilee, the son of an artisan builder. The Greek for Joseph’s profession is *tekton*, which suggests he could have been a general builder i.e. a worker in both wood and stone. Jesus’ disciples were mainly peasants and fishermen drawn from the towns and villages of Galilee (although both Matthew / Levi in Capernaum and Zacchaeus in Jericho were tax collectors) and from the outset Jesus offered them a radically new way of understanding status and security (e.g. Mt.6v19-34). More than that He promised to usher in the Year of Jubilee, *the year of the Lord’s favour* (Lk.4v18-21).

The Year of Jubilee (Isa.61v1-2)

After six years of agriculture God decreed that the land should lie fallow for one year (Lev.25v1-7), to allow the ground to recover and to enable the poor to gather freely what grew that year on the unattended field (Ex.23v10-11). It was also a time for cancelling debts and letting the oppressed go free (Deut.15v2-18). It was called a *Sabbatical Year*, a *Year of Rest*, a *Sabbath of Rest*.

Every 50th year was the culmination of the sabbatical years, when debts were remitted, property reverted to its original owners, and Jews who had sold themselves into slavery through debt were set free (Lev.25v8ff). It was time of great rejoicing and an expression of supreme trust in God, whose land this was (Lv.25v23).

It is to the Year of Jubilee that *the year of the Lord’s favour* (Isa.61v2 cf 49v8-9), quoted by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk.4v19), most fully refers. And the writer to the Hebrews also makes mention of the *Sabbath rest* for the people of God in Heb.4v9-10, in the context of our salvation.

IN CONCLUSION

Palestine at the time of Jesus was a predominantly agricultural country, with a large poor peasant class and a small and privileged ruling class. Life was precarious at the best of times and most people’s situation was worsened by high levels of debt and a harsh taxation burden, imposed by those out to make a profit for themselves.

Jesus appears with a revolutionary message about status, security and about those who are going to be first in the Kingdom of God (Mt.21v31-32).