

Was Jesus A Carpenter?

'Is this not the carpenter's Son?' (Matthew 13:55).

'Is this not the carpenter?' (Mark 6:3).

The first verse infers Joseph was a carpenter; the second verse infers Jesus Himself was a carpenter; but were they just woodworkers? The scriptures do not specify exactly what trade Joseph and Jesus were involved in, but by exploring the scriptures, we can have a fairly good idea. Many Christians assume Joseph was dead by the time Jesus began His ministry, but that assumption may not be correct. 'Isn't this Jesus, the Son of Joseph, Whose father and mother we know?' (John 6:42). We know Mary was not dead, and she was included in the same sentence. The people of Capernaum said 'know' (present tense) not knew (past tense), so this one word implies the people knew Joseph at that time. There is another verse that indicates Joseph was still alive. 'All spoke well of Him and marvelled at the words of grace that came forth from His mouth; and they said, "Is this not Joseph's Son?"' (Luke 4:22). What the two above references to Jesus' occupation as a carpenter meant, was not to describe His mode of employment, but that the people who knew Jesus were amazed that a Tradesman could know so much about the scriptures and do miracles. They could have said, "How could a mere carpenter know all that?" Jesus' knowledge of the scriptures was especially surprising to the Jews, because Jesus never attended school. There were schools in those days, but apparently, Jesus never went. 'The Jews were astonished and said, "How does this Man know letters, having never been educated?"'(John 7:15)

'Carpenter' is an English word, not a Hebrew word, and it has just one meaning; 'an artificer of wood'. Because carpenter has just one meaning, we cannot go any further with the word; it cannot be explored. The closest we can get in English to the Hebrew word for 'carpenter' is 'Nagar'. Many of the names, places, phrases and words in the Old Testament are multi-used (homonyms). In the English language, we have thousands of homonyms (multi-use words). One example is a bear (an animal), to bear (carry), to bear (tolerate) to bear (give birth to) and is phonetically like bare (uncovered). The Hebrew word for carpenter (nagar) is also a homonym so we can explore it further. Nagar can mean a woodworker, but it can also mean a skilled tradesman or craftsman of any kind; an architect, a master builder, a stonemason, a ploughman, a tiller, a scholar or a Rabbi (which means 'teacher'), all of which applied to Jesus in a spiritual sense.

In the New Testament, Jesus was asked many times to heal the sick. That is not a job for a tradesman – it is a job for a Rabbi. Jesus was invited to dinner to dine with people so they could listen to His teachings – not to repair their tables. The five items of clothing Jesus wore (John 19:23) were the garments of a Rabbi – not a woodworker. Jesus had disciples; Rabbi's have disciples – tradesmen do not. Jesus called Himself Rabbi. 'You are not to call yourselves Rabbi for you have one Rabbi (Teacher) the Messiah, and you are all brothers' (Matthew 23:8). He called Himself a Teacher. 'You call Me Teacher and the Lord. You have done so correctly, for that is what I am' (John 13:13). Jesus was called 'Rabbi' sixteen times, and 'Teacher' forty-seven times, and there are fourteen verses that tell us He taught in the synagogues. By these verses we can assume Jesus preferred to be known as a Rabbi or Teacher rather than a woodworker.

Here are two more uses of the word nagar. It is phonetically like the word for tiller; someone who ploughs a field. Nagar can be a ploughman; one who prepares soil for planting, which also applies to Jesus in a spiritual sense. It can also mean a way to uncover the truth. 'Samson said to them, "If you had not been ploughing with my heifer, you would not have found the answer to my riddle"' (Judges 14:18). What Samson meant was; if they had not been seeking the truth from Samson's wife, they would never have uncovered the answer. So we can see that in Hebrew, ploughing or tilling a field was a metaphor for seeking truthful answers. That fits in with what Jesus was all about – giving us the truth.

There is not one verse in the Bible that says Jesus worked with wood, that He built anything, that He worked with stone, or ploughed a field, so we have no scripture that tells us exactly what Jesus did before He began His ministry. What we can do is study the scriptures to work out that it is possible that Jesus was a builder; a constructor of houses and other buildings. That was a subject Jesus knew a lot about. He used parables about buildings and houses to get His point across. There was the parable of the wise or foolish men who built their houses on rock or sand (Matthew 7:24 to 27; Luke 6:48 & 49). The disciples wanted Jesus to take notice of the temple buildings (Matthew 24:1). They pointed out what kind of buildings they were, what they were made of and the quality of the stone walls (Mark 13:1). It was as though they wanted to talk about a subject that they knew, Jesus knew about. Jesus referred to Himself as the Chief Cornerstone (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). So it seems that Jesus knew about ground quality, foundations,

cornerstones and building materials; subjects an architect, carpenter, builder, stonemason or any skilled tradesman in the building industry would know all about.

It is more likely that Joseph was a Master Tradesman or a Master Builder with a high social status, than just a lowly cabinetmaker. Jesus would have followed in his (step) father's footsteps as was the custom of the day, so Jesus would also have been a Tradesman, taught by Joseph. By the time Jesus began his public ministry at age thirty (Luke 3:23), He was already well known, honoured and respected around the whole district of what is now Israel, and that indicates a high social status. 'And Jesus Himself conducted teaching in their synagogues, being recognised and honoured by all' (Luke 4:15). Jesus did not teach His earthly trade, but taught the scriptures according to what God the Father taught Him (John 7:16). Jesus' high social standing may have been the reason the Pharisees were so offended when Jesus fraternised with the people they considered to be the poor and/or common 'riffraff'. 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' (Matthew 9:11). 'If this Man were a prophet He would surely know what kind of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner' (Luke 7:39). If Jesus was considered to be just a woodworker, the Pharisees would not have been concerned about who He mixed with.

The scriptures say Joseph was a righteous man (Matthew 1:19). Mary was an innocent and pure girl, chosen and blessed (Luke 1:27 & 28). This couple were especially chosen by God to bring forth and raise the Son of God and teach Him the scriptures, to prepare Him for His ministry. It was the role of the parents to teach their children about the things of God, day and night. 'You shall lay up My words in your hearts and in your souls and bind them for a sign upon your hands and as a forehead band between your eyes, and you shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you rise up' (Deuteronomy 11:18 & 19). The job of teaching Jesus from a young child about the things of God, fell upon the shoulders of Mary and Joseph, so most of what He learned, He would have learned from His parents; and since we read that he did not attend school, He was 'home schooled'. Jesus knew how to read and write, so they would have taught Him that too. In view of the fact that Jesus knew so much at such a young age, Mary and Joseph must have been excellent teachers of God's Word. This is consistent with the scriptures when Jesus was shown to be extremely knowledgeable in the Hebrew Scriptures at just 12 years old. 'After three days they (Mary and Joseph) found Him (Jesus) in the temple, sitting amongst the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard Him were astonished at His intelligence, understanding and His replies' (Luke 2:46 & 47). As a Jewish boy, Jesus was very well versed in the scriptures. That prepared Him for His earthly ministry.

Not everybody had the privilege of standing up in the synagogue to speak; in just the same way, not everybody is given permission to stand up in a modern synagogue or church to speak. No stranger can walk in off the street and teach, so before anyone teaches in a modern synagogue or church, they first become known to the elders; just as Jesus was known to them. If Jesus really was a poor woodworking carpenter, nobody would have listened to Him or honoured Him, but because He was well versed in the scriptures, financially well off, enjoyed a high social status and was the eldest Son; all that opened doors and gave Him the chance to have incredible influence over the population. Whatever Jesus and Joseph's trade was, it paid well because Jesus owned a very expensive seamless tunic, like a warm singlet (John 19:23). Jesus would have enjoyed social privileges unavailable for less honoured Jews.

We have already read that Jesus was well known and honoured as a Teacher. The scriptures tell us that Jesus taught in several synagogues all over Israel, especially in Jerusalem and in other cities and villages that are not mentioned by name. 'He entered the synagogue as was His custom on the Sabbath Day and He stood up to read. There was handed to Him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor; He has sent Me to free the captives and give sight to the blind; to deliver those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"' (Isaiah 61:1 & 2; Luke 4:16 to 19). That caused amazement and offence amongst the Pharisees. 'He taught in their synagogues so that they were amazed and wondered where He got the wisdom ... and they were offended by Him' (Matthew 13:54 to 57). 'On the Sabbath He began to teach in the synagogue and many who listened to Him were utterly astonished and wondered where He got the wisdom and power ... and they were offended at Him and were hurt' (Mark 6:2 & 3). It seems as though the Pharisees did not like a young Man knowing more than they did. That same attitude is prevalent amongst pastors and church leaders today. They become offended if somebody knows more than they do and they shut them out, just like the Pharisees did to Jesus. Pastors especially dislike those who have never been called to Bible College. They act as though God Himself is not able to personally teach people, but they think everyone must go through their mode of religious instruction. Many pastors are

so indoctrinated by Bible College they can no longer seek out the truth. The scribes and Pharisees acted just the same way, and Jesus rebuked them severely for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23:13 to 35; Luke 11:42 to 54).

Jesus has fulfilled the many roles that are described by the word 'nagar'. He is the Architect Who designed the Way of salvation for mankind. He is the Tiller of the ground or the Ploughman Who prepares our hearts so that the seeds of faith may be planted and take root in us. He is the One Who plants the Truth in our hearts and prunes away the 'dead leaves' or sin in our lives. He is our Foundation – He is our Rock on which to build our faith. He is the Cornerstone – the beginning of our foundation. He is the Master Builder – the One Who builds and fashions us out of clay into a temple for the Holy Spirit to dwell in. He is the Stonemason, the skilled Craftsman Who chips away at our sin until it is no longer there, and the form left behind is the beautiful piece of His Handiwork, there for people to see and to glorify God. He is the Scholar, Teacher and Rabbi – He is the Word of God, Who teaches us in all His ways and washes us clean with the Word of God.

Many of the New Testament teachers worked with their trade and they were teachers. For example, Paul was an apostle and a tent maker (Acts 18:3). Since the custom was for sons to follow their fathers in the family business, whatever that business was, as Joseph's legal Son, Jesus would have taken up Joseph's trade. What work Jesus did up until He started His ministry, is trivial compared to the outcome of His ministry. The fact that Joseph and Mary taught Jesus so well, is an indication that God the Father was careful to choose the perfect couple to raise and teach Jesus, the Son of God.

Amen and God bless you.

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