



All in a Day's Work

By Jim West

What sort of work did people in Ancient Israel (the Old Testament period) and Roman Palestine (the New Testament era) do for a living? How did they survive? And how was their economic situation different from ours? How much money did they make for the jobs they did?

First, Israel, comprised of ten tribes in the north and two in the south, was an agricultural society in both the Old and New Testament periods. Farmers did their best to scratch out a living but were often hindered by infestations of insects, drought, and invading armies which pillaged their crops and burned the remnants. The land yielded poorly and harvests were quite slim. It was, to put it simply, mere subsistence living (Mt 22:5). Wages were extremely low for day laborers who simply for the most part earned enough so that they could stop by the market on their way home and purchase bread for their family and perhaps fruit and vegetables if they were in season.

It is quite impossible to determine precise wages, since terms like 'shekel' and 'denarius' were originally used of weights and then only later of coinage. The best way to think of Old Testament and New Testament 'income' for the average Israelite is to imagine a poor person working for minimum wage with nothing at all left over at the end of the week that hasn't been spent on absolute necessities and an utter inability to enjoy any luxuries. More than that simply cannot be known because the data are incomplete. That said, there were very rich people as well; but as is the case with the poor, we simply have no way of evaluating the absolute nature and extent of that wealth.

Crops raised in Israel were primarily olives, fruits (like pomegranates and grapes), barley, wheat, and other minor cereals. Animals raised were sheep and goats and small cattle. Donkeys and camels were the chief beasts of burden, along with oxen, which were used as plow animals. Farms tended to be quite small. Essentially they were village co-operatives, meaning that the males of the village tended community plots. This, naturally, limited the land that could be farmed to those capable of working the land.

Geographically, Israel is comprised of several different landscapes, all of which were utilized in different ways. The northern part of the country (around the Sea of Galilee) was quite fertile with excellent land and so served as the 'breadbasket' of the country. It also was an area where fishing was extremely important. Fishermen harvested the Sea of Galilee. Several of the disciples of Jesus were occupied with that very task (cf. Mt 4:18, 13:48). The central highlands were fairly rocky and so were better suited to grazing, groves and vineyards, and small terrace farming. And the coastal plains were fairly sparsely inhabited tending towards sandy soil ill suited for larger agricultural enterprises (though of course each segment of the country included every aspect of agricultural life—farms and herds and vineyards, etc.).

Second, many owned farms and many were day laborers on farms. The land, was, after all, owned primarily by families that settled in particular locations and worked their plot of land together. When there were insufficient laborers within the family the farms either shrank, or if the land was productive enough, extra laborers were hired. These 'day laborers' gathered early

in the morning at the town square and as farmers came through they hired those they needed (Mt 20:1-15). By law, these day laborers were expected to be compensated at the end of each day so that, on the way home they could purchase foodstuffs at the market.

Third, others were herdsmen (Gen 13:5). Amos was, for instance, a herdsman and a farmer. David, too, was a shepherd. The Shepherd was responsible for the well-being of his animals and if necessary was expected to give his life for them. Psalm 23 is a fantastic description of the Shepherd's tasks. Such men spent the majority of their time away from their families, leading their flocks and herds from one patch of grasslands to the next. As isolated persons they came to be viewed, by the New Testament period at least, as peculiar. On the social scale they were very near the bottom, which makes the angelic appearance to the shepherds in Luke's Gospel (Lk 2:8) even more remarkable.

Fourth, still others were skilled laborers, artisans, craftsmen, tanners, and metal-smiths (1 Chr 22:15). These occupations were necessary for the functioning of the State. They decorated the homes of the wealthy, made exquisite and common clothing, formed all the sorts of metal-works an army or farmers would need, and turned raw animal hide into both household items and writing material. Joseph, the father of Jesus, was a 'carpenter' by trade, a skilled worker who turned raw wood houses and household furniture. He also, though, would have utilized stone as a building material too. Carpenters in ancient Israel were skilled masons as well as skilled woodworkers.

Fifth, a few were government officials and soldiers (1 Kings 16:2). Such persons were the 'employees' of the state for the furthering of its goals. Government scribes kept official records, copied legal documents, and preserved archival materials. Since literacy was very low in the ancient Near East (less than 3% according to some estimates), these scribes were extremely important. Even Kings relied on them to learn of potential threats from foreign powers. Soldiers too were very important but originally—before the rise of the Monarchy—were nothing more than farmers called to arms for common defense. As the State grew and a standing army became necessary, funds were raised through taxation by the Monarch. Lands were seized though as well, and the lower classes forced into military service. Not everyone in ancient Israel thought highly of the government. 1 Samuel 8:11-18 paints a picture of the Monarchy describing how the King would plunder his own people for his advantage, a passage that must be read to be appreciated.

The King, whether of Israel or of Rome, employed 'tax collectors' in order to raise funds. Then, as now, agents of the State who took money from citizens were not the most popular people. But in Jesus' day especially the tax collectors in Palestine were viewed with utter contempt because they were seen to be agents of an oppressive occupying power. When Levi, the 'tax collector' plied his trade, he collected funds for Rome, but skimmed off the top to make his own living. The story of Zacchaeus too shows a tax collector who felt badly about ripping people off so he declares that he has repaid fourfold anything he has wrongly taken! (See Luke 5:27, 18:10-14, 19:2-9).

Sixth, even fewer were religious officials (or priests) (Lev 21:1). The priests performed sacrifices, announcing the forgiveness of transgressions once the proper rituals were performed, and of course tended the Tabernacle/Temple/Sacred Place. These priests were normally literate (and had to be in order to read sacred texts) which differentiated them from the majority of the population. Their work was, essentially, to serve as a 'bridge' between the Deity and the populace. God would speak to the Priests and the Priests would speak to the people. The people would bring their requests to the Priests, and the Priests would pray to God for them. In

Ancient Israel, in other words, access to the Divine was mediated through the Priest. Priests were, then, extraordinarily important.

Seventh, and finally, women normally did not work outside the home (or rather, off the farm). But in the home they were very, very busy with raising the children, preparing food, making clothes, and managing the household (Proverbs 31). Women were valued very highly (though sometimes people are told that they were no more important than livestock, this was simply untrue). Without their contributions to the family, and therefore to society, it would have crumbled. To be sure, they were not the heads of households, but they could easily rise to positions of power. Think, for instance, of Deborah and Huldah, a Judge and a Prophetess, to name just two.

The Bible is full of references to everyday occupations. Sometimes the work described is familiar to us even today, and in other ways it is remote and unfamiliar. Paying attention to the ways the biblical authors made use of language about work to discuss larger concerns about the human-God relationship can enhance our understanding of both the text and of the ancient world.

For Further Reading:

Life in Biblical Israel, by Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager.

The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction, by Rainer Kessler.

Labor, Crafts, and Commerce in Ancient Israel, by Moshe Aberbach

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