

Jesus the Builder

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Mark

An incident in Jesus' hometown gives a rare insight into his work prior to becoming a traveling preacher. The context is that Jesus' hometown friends and acquaintances can't believe that this familiar local boy has become a great teacher and prophet. In the course of their complaints, they say, "What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:2–3). This is the only passage in the Bible to directly state Jesus' trade. (In Matthew 13:55, Jesus is called "the carpenter's son," and Luke and John do not mention his profession.) The underlying Greek (*tekton*) refers to a builder or craftsman in any kind of material, which in Palestine would generally be stone or brick. The English rendering "carpenter" may reflect the fact that in London wood was the more common building material at the time the first English translations were made.

In any case, a number of Jesus' parables take place at construction sites. How much of Jesus' personal experience might be reflected in these parables? Did he help construct a fence, dig a wine press, or build a tower in a vineyard, and observe the strained relations between the landowner and the tenants? Did one of his customers run out of money halfway through building a tower and leave an unpaid debt to Jesus? Did he remember Joseph teaching him how to dig a foundation all the way to solid rock, so that the building can withstand wind and flood? Did he ever hire assistants and have to face grumbling about pay and pecking order? Was he ever supervised by a manager who asked him to join in a scheme to defraud the owner? In short, how much of the wisdom in Jesus' parables was developed through his experience as a tradesman in the first-century economy? If nothing else, remembering Jesus' experience as a builder can help us see the parables in a more concrete light.