

LIFE OUTSIDE THE HOME The Potter and Carpenter

Two common trades in Bible times were that of potter and carpenter. A fair amount of reference is made in the Bible to each of these professions. Today, we learn a little about their work.

Potters and Pottery

Pottery was particularly important to the people of Jesus' day because they had no refrigerators, ice, or other ways of keeping liquid cool. Water held in clay pots, however, would stay reasonably cool if kept out of direct sunlight.

The trade of potter was a busy one. Wealthy individuals might even have their own personal craftsmen. Royalty would have their "royal potters" who worked only for them.

Pottery was made then in essentially the same way it is now, except without the use of electric tools. The potter's wheel consisted of two wooden discs connected by a shaft of wood. On the upper disc, he would place the clay to be shaped. The lower disc he would turn with his foot so that he could use both hands to shape the piece. The potter could use a small piece of wood or metal to help shape the outside of the pot as it was spinning on the wheel.



There is a good description of the potter and his trade in one of the apocryphal books:

So is the potter sitting at his work, and turning the wheel about with his feet, who is always anxiously set at his work, and all his handiwork is by number; he will fashion the clay with his arm, and he will bend its strength in front of his feet; he will apply his heart to finish the glazing; and will be wakeful to clean the furnace.

After the clay has been shaped, it must be baked. The kiln was a well made out of stones with a fire burning in a brick oven at the bottom. The earthenware was stacked on the oven and then the whole thing was covered with brush to keep the heat in. The potter then waits for articles to harden.

Reference to Potters and Pottery in the Bible

God as a Potter

A potter is one who creates by molding and forming things with his own skilled hand. In Scripture, God is referred to as a "potter" –for He also is one who creates, molding and forming by the power of his "hands." Jer 18:6 *O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. Rom 9:20-21 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?*

For Further Study

In what context are the passages in Rom 9:20-21 spoken?

Why are the people criticizing God and what is Paul's answer?

Fragile Pottery

Today when we buy a piece of ceramic, it is finished to a point where it can actually be very strong. In Bible times, finished pottery was not as strong as what can be done with modern firing and

glazing techniques. Sometimes even slight damage to a water jar could result in its ruin.

Figuratively, the wicked are often spoken of as those who will be broken like fragile pottery. Jer 19:11 *'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired.* God is described as one who will dash the wicked in pieces "like a potter's vessel" (Ps 2:9), and in Rev 2:27 *' He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery' --just as I have received authority from my Father.* There will be no joy for those who do not believe in Jesus. They will be destroyed at the Last Judgment. How thankful we can be that Christ saves His children from this end by His death on the cross!



Broken Pottery

Since pottery was often weak and breakage would be frequent, it was common to use the broken fragments for other things. In the evening, children would come to the public ovens carrying shards of pottery. The baker would clean out the oven and place the warm coals on the pottery. The children would then take the coals back home so that the evening meal could be warmed up. Pottery fragments were also used as drinking "cups." If they were of the right shape and size they could be useful at the well or the river. Finally, archaeologists have even uncovered pieces that were used as "paper." People would scratch markings into pottery shards if they did not have anything else to write on.

Carpenters

Another common trade found in Bible lands was that of carpenter. The most familiar carpenters to us, of course, are probably Joseph and his stepson Jesus. Carpentry in Palestine today has not changed much since those days. Some now use modern tools, but many can be found who still do everything by hand. Isaiah 44:13 mentions the main tools of the carpenter:

¹³ The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses.

Carpenters also used flint knives and made their own saws out of flexible

metal strips. Hammer and nails were common tools as well. Nails were usually made of bronze or iron. During these weeks of Lent where we are remembering Christ's suffering and death, it is hard to forget that He was *nailed* to the cross; nailed with the very instruments He once used in the "shop" with Joseph.



An awl would be used for making holes in the wood. These few items usually made up the whole of the carpenter's tools. To make nice things from such simple tools took a lot of skill.

What Did They Make?

What kinds of things would Joseph and Jesus have made? An ancient tradition tells us that they made plows and yokes. While this cannot be proven, it is at least a strong possibility. Tools for use in the fields were some of the most common things for carpenters to make. Other things might have included doors, windows, tables, chairs, and wooden keys or locks for houses.

The Great Carpenter

In Mark 6:3 we read *Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?* And they took offense at him. When Jesus returned to preach at His hometown of Nazareth, He was rejected as a "mere carpenter." May we always remember that the Christ was ever so much more than that. He truly suffered, died, was buried, and rose again the third day to give us life forever with Him.

Resources

- ! *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* by Fred H. Wight
- ! www.biblepicturegallery.com

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