

Village Life in First Century Palestine

From: *Into the Desert. Cultural Snapshots to unlock the Scriptures* by Dr Dan White and Dr Kate O'Brien

Location:

In the Galilee region it was estimated there were around 2409 villages and towns (Jesus' preaching tour in Galilee – Mk 1:35-39). The average village was small, covering no more than one hectare, with a population of only a few hundred people (Nazareth). Larger towns were generally walled (Jericho and Nain) and had around two thousand inhabitants.

Major cities, such as Jerusalem, were the dwelling place of the elite and dominated the social and geographical landscape. Herod the great constructed Caesarea to provide a port on the coast of Palestine and to create a monument to honour Caesar Augustus. Herod Antipas was responsible for the major development of the cities Sepphoris and Tiberias on the shore of Lake Galilee.

An estate was often a walled compound, with domestic quarters, storage rooms, ritual baths and pressing installations for oil and wine.

Communal Gathering Places:

Daily life was centred upon the market place and village square, generally with a communal well. Often the market place and the local inn were situated on the outskirts of the town, allowing Gentile traders to visit without coming into the heart of a Jewish community (The Good Samaritan Luke 10: 25-37).

At the hub of larger villages was the synagogue – which apart from its religious function was also the central meeting place, the local school and the seat of the local Jewish government.

Buildings were constructed in close proximity to one another, separated by small paved walkways, often no wider than the width of a camel on either side with bales of flax.

Each village had a special corner where day labourers gathered hoping to be hired. Casual labourers used to gather in the 'agora' or town-square waiting for employers to hire them.

Village hospitality:

The Jewish law with respect to offering hospitality within village communities to Jewish travellers was a significant aspect of Jewish life. Hospitality was generally extended, in the first instance, by a village elder. Once a stranger has established their honour as gained the approval of the elder, generally through a challenge and retort interaction, then all in the village would welcome and respect the visitor.

The granting of hospitality extended beyond simply giving food and drink, to providing shelter and, most importantly, guaranteeing one's personal security whilst in the village. For a visitor to be threatened or assaulted whilst under the protection of the elder would have brought great shame to all involved.

Notwithstanding the laws of hospitality to fellow Jews, Gentile visitors to the village would have been treated with deep distrust and even fear. Banditry and theft were not uncommon especially given the harsh taxation regime of both the Jewish Roman authorities and the large number of poor and disposed people within the community. The precarious nature of a subsistence lifestyle meant there was little in the way of resources to share with outsiders, particularly those who might abscond with the limited possessions of the household.

Gender Roles:

Gender roles were strictly adhered to in a Palestinian village. Child rearing and managing the family household was for women, whilst earning a living was a male domain. Similarly only females would act as midwives, whilst males would attend to any legal and contractual matters. What limited education was available within a village context was restricted to males.

In village society a stranger would not make eye contact with a woman in a public place: certainly directly addressing her would have been very inappropriate. It would be expected that a male, as a matter of courtesy and decency would withdraw for the area by about six metres to allow a woman to attend to her business of drawing water.

Village Customs:

'Neighbours' in first century Palestine were generally other law abiding Jews or, at the very least, other residents in the town or village.

Children had no social status within a village community. By putting a child before the apostles and embracing him, Jesus was reversing the normal social customs.

In a Jewish community; it was considered to be totally inappropriate to sell one's land to a Gentile. A Jewish man who inherited land from within the family was honour bound to preserve it and utilise it for the good of the family. A son who wasted the family inheritance would be exiled from the village by a 'kezazah' ceremony. In this ritual the village breaks a large pot in front of the man (or in his absence, symbols of the person such as clothing) in order to symbolically and officially proclaim the separation between the man and the village.