



EXAMINING JESUS' INCLUSION OF WORK ROLES IN HIS PARABLES

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What early life experiences could best prepare Jesus to be formed for his distinctive divine-human role as Messiah and Savior of the world? To set the context for this question, imagine being invited to observe that special planning session in eternity past, when our Trinitarian God considered creating the world and mapping out a plan of redemption. Adopting a finite human perspective, consider what might have transpired at that divine brainstorming session. These options come to mind.

It might be important for the Messiah to grow up in a family closely associated with the Temple, such as a *priestly* household. Days could be devoted to studying Scripture, prayer, and daily access to the temple precincts. That was the heritage for both John the Baptizer and for the Old Testament prophet Samuel who lived by the Tabernacle.¹ Although Samuel's parents were not priests, after Samuel was weaned, he grew up with Eli's priestly family.² Or, perhaps the Messiah could be raised within a *Pharisee's* household as was true for the Apostle Paul.³ This lay movement was highly devoted to God and zealous for the application of Old Testament Scriptures (Torah and tradition) to daily living.

Instead, Jesus was sovereignly assigned to an ordinary couple, Mary and Joseph, who worked in a "secular" trade.⁴ After returning from their brief sojourn in Egypt, Jesus' family moved north to Galilee, a couple of day's journey from Jerusalem. During his young adult years, Jesus lived far away from the temple precincts, devoting his days to getting his hands dirty with building materials as a "blue collar" construction worker.

That may seem remarkable in light of a commonly held view today that deems secular work as of lower value than "full-time vocational ministry." Yet by taking a deeper look at Jesus' teachings and his own "secular" work experience prior to his public ministry, we may come to appreciate how this form of work had a significant role in Jesus' life, and how it continues to have a vital role in God's ongoing work today. Part one of this paper considers what can be

¹ Luke 1:5-17.

² 1 Sam. 1:12-28; 2:11; 18-21.

³ Acts 23:6; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5.

⁴ Matt. 13:55.

inferred about Jesus' life as a construction worker of that day. Part two surveys the many parables that include a reference to work within the storyline, with a view to discerning some connections to Jesus' own work experience. Finally, a few implications are offered regarding our participation in work today.

Part One: Jesus at Work as a Tradesman

How many years would Jesus have worked as a tradesman? Calculating that time period depends on two time markers. Jesus was probably apprenticed alongside his father Joseph by age twelve or thirteen, as was customary for boys in that day.⁵ Regarding when Jesus began his public ministry, Harold Hoehner proposes that Jesus, “would have been around thirty-two or thirty-three.”⁶ Thus, Jesus labored with his hands for about twenty years—six times as long as his three-year public ministry, as shown in Table 1.⁷

Table 1: Jesus' Twenty Years in the Construction Trade

Phases:	Child	Young Adulthood	Later Adulthood
Years:	Twelve or thirteen years	Twenty years	Three years
Occupation:		Working in the family construction trade	Ministering as Messiah

Only two New Testament verses offer any comment about what kind of work Jesus did. His former neighbors in Nazareth recognized Jesus by his previous occupation: “Isn’t this the *tektōn*?”⁸ The Greek term *tektōn* (pronounced as “teck-tone”), from which we derive such words as *tectonic* and *architect*, has been translated in English as “carpenter,” starting with William Tyndale’s version of 1526, and subsequently appearing in all other European translations, including German and French Bibles. Yet some scholars are discovering that *tektōn* includes a greater range of skills and projects than our current understanding of carpentry. J. I. Packer explains, “Though ‘carpenter’ is the common rendering here, *tektōn* could equally mean ‘mason’ or ‘smith’ (as indeed some of the [Church] Fathers took it); or it could mean that Joseph and Jesus were builders, so that both carpentry and masonry would have been among their skills.”⁹

Based on his extensive word study, Campbell suggests “builder” as the better translation, “In the context of first-century Israel, the *tektōn* was a general craftsman who worked with stone, wood,

⁵ Craig Blomberg explains, “Jewish boys were sent to school (usually in a synagogue) if one was available, from ages five to twelve or thirteen...[studying] the Bible exclusively...At the beginning of adolescence, education usually ended and boys learned a trade, often their father’s, though sometimes they worked as an apprentice to another man” (*Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2d ed. [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009] 69).

⁶ Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 38. Hoehner explains that Luke’s use of “about” [Gk. *hōsei*] regarding Jesus’ age when he launched his ministry (“about thirty years of age,” Luke 3:23) “indicates that Jesus was not exactly thirty years of age” (p. 38).

⁷ Hoehner affirms, “The present author thinks that Christ’s ministry was at least three years in duration and that Christ’s crucifixion was in A.D. 33” (*Ibid.*, 37).

⁸ Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55.

⁹ J. I. Packer, “Carpenter, Builder, Workman, Craftsman, Trade [*tektōn*],” *NIDNTT* (ed. Colin Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1.279.

and sometimes metal in large and small building projects.”¹⁰ Campbell explains that *tektōn* referred to construction in stone, whenever the term occurred in the Jewish literature and in the Greek Old Testament Bible of Jesus’ day (LXX, the Septuagint). Stone was ever-present and inexpensive. Less available in that day was wood, which was reserved for special projects, such as royal places, the temple, and idol making.

For Jesus’ family to work in a trade indicates they were in the lower middle-income class of that day.¹¹ Darrell Bock notes, “Only artisans or other craftspeople had the ancient equivalent of small, independent businesses. They constituted a minority of the labor force.”¹² Furthermore, tradition suggests that Joseph died a few years prior to Jesus entering public ministry. Then Jesus, as the eldest son, would have been the one primarily responsible to see family living expenses were met through his and his brothers’ work as day laborers.¹³

Is there anything else that can be mentioned about Jesus’ work life? Richard Batey affirms with others that most of the laborers from Nazareth probably worked on building projects in the city of Sepphoris near Nazareth. Batey notes:

*A ten-minute walk from the Nazareth spring to the top of the ridge north of the village rewards one with the magnificent vista of the broad and fertile Bet Netofa Valley a thousand feet below. The hill of Sepphoris, three miles north, rises almost four hundred feet from the valley floor. This is a beautiful and inviting view toward the site of ancient Sepphoris... The walk from Nazareth to Sepphoris takes about an hour.*¹⁴

In 4 B.C. King Herod (Antipas) chose Sepphoris as the capital of his kingdom and rebuilt the city, which included his principal residence and administrative center. Then about twenty years later, sometime between 18 and 20 A.D., Herod moved his capital to Tiberius. Although Sepphoris was the largest and most important city in Galilee, a cosmopolitan city of great wealth and beauty, no reference to Sepphoris appears in the New Testament. Jesus and Joseph may have worked on a 4,000-seat amphitheater, with a stage 156 feet wide and 27 feet long. Batey suggests that Jesus’ use of the term “hypocrite”—“acting under a mask” may have come from his exposure to dramatic presentations in Sepphoris.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ken M. Campbell, “What Was Jesus’ Occupation?” *JETS* 48 (2005): 512. Campbell suggests that the preference in European translations for “carpenter” may have been influenced by house construction at the time of the translation. “As a rule, unless [translators] visited the land of Israel, people assumed that the material culture there was similar to their own. Since most European homes were constructed of timber, it was easy to assume that homes in Israel were built the same way” (p. 519).

¹¹ Walter Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), p. 46. For more recent information about assessing Jesus’ economic status within a seven-scaled framework, see Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 2010, p. 117 and footnote #17 on that page.

¹² Darrell Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 122.

¹³ Matt. 13:55-56.

¹⁴ Richard A. Batey, *New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 70-71. The contents of Batey’s book was originally commissioned to be included in the Christmas December 1989 issue of the *National Geographic* magazine, but was eventually pulled from publication by the editors. This book includes illustrations and personal information from Batey’s archaeological digs at Sepphoris.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

Does Jesus genuinely understand the business world as an insider? Clearly, the answer is affirmative. During his young adult years, Jesus worked with his hands in masonry and carpentry, in good and bad weather, getting paid and not getting paid. And, for a few years, he had responsibilities for day-to-day operations of running what we would call a small “secular” business. Jesus probably worked alongside other artisans, negotiating bids, securing supplies, completing projects, and contributing to family living expenses. Jesus can identify with the ups and downs of a business workday.

Since Jesus was a shrewd observer of life, offering wisdom gleaned from birds, flowers, and the weather, perhaps this work experience also provided such insights that he included in his parables.¹⁶

Part Two: The Majority of Jesus’ Parables Include Work in the Main Storyline

Of the thirty-seven parables in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), thirty-two mention some form of work-related activity as part of the storyline (i.e., eighty-six percent; see Table 2).¹⁷ Among these thirty-two parables, Jesus alludes to twenty-two different kinds of work activities or roles (see column 2, Table 2).¹⁸ For twenty-five of these parables, the identified work roles are a main part of the storyline (i.e., sixty-seven percent of the total of thirty-seven parables), while in seven parables, identified work roles were only minor details.¹⁹

Table 2: Jesus’ Parables That Include Work-Related Activities

* Table lists parables mainly following Luke’s order

\--indicates a previously mentioned work role.

(parentheses)—indicates work reference only a minor detail of parable.

32 Parables	22 Work Activities	Matthew: 17 Parables	Mark: 4 Parables	Luke:* 21 Parables
1. Two Builders	A. Building	7:24-27		6:47-49
2. Children in the Marketplaces	(B. Business)	11:16-19		7:31-35
3. Two Debtors	C. Banking			7:41-43
4. Four Soils & Sower	D. Farming	13:3-9/18-23	4:3-9/13-20	8:5-8/11-15
5. Growing Seed	\Farming		4:26-29	
6. Wheat and Weeds	\Farming	13:24-30, 36-43		

¹⁶ Matt. 6:26-28; Matt 16:3.

¹⁷ For the technical details behind the calculations about parables in this section and discussion of some of these parables, see Klaus Issler, “Exploring the Pervasive References to Work in Jesus’ Parables,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, forthcoming 2014.

¹⁸ In Table 2, some of the work activities identified recur in other parables, so the first reference was assigned a distinct letter of the alphabet. Also, Luke’s order of the presentation of parables was followed since Luke includes the majority of Jesus’ parables. Two additional “work roles” were identified but not included in the table as not being morally worthy: a) robber (Luke 10:30, 18:11) or thief (Matt 24:43, Luke 12:39), and b) prostitute (Luke 15:30).

¹⁹ The seven parables for which work references are minor details are: 2. Children in the Marketplace, 11. Rich Fool, 16. Great Banquet, 21. Prodigal Son, 28. Two Sons, 30. Wedding Feast and 31. Ten Bridesmaids. Table 2 identifies this latter group by including the main work roles named within parentheses.

7. Field of Hidden Treasure	E. Buying [Real estate]	13:44		
8. Pearl of Great Price	F. Merchant	13:45-46		
9. Dragnet	G. Fishing	13:47-50		
10. Good Samaritan	H. Temple-related (I. Innkeeper)			10:30-37
11. Rich Fool	\(Farming)			12:16-21
12. Watchful Servants	J. Servant/Slave		13:34-37	12:35-38
13. Householder & Thief	K. (Master Householder)	24:43-44		12:39-40
14. Faithful & Unfaithful Manager	L. Management	24:45-51		12:42-48
15. Barren Fig Tree	\Farming			13:6-9
16. Great Banquet	\(Master Householder)			14:16-24
17. Unfinished Tower	\Building			14:28-30
18. Warring King	M. King			14:31-33
19. Lost Sheep	N. Shepherd	18:12-14		15:4-7
20. Unforgiven Debt	O. Jailor	18:23-35		
21. Prodigal Son	(P. Laborer), \(Farming)			15:11-32
22. Unjust Manager	(Q. Begging), /Management			16:1-13
23. Unprofitable Servant	\Servant/Slave			17:7-10
24. Unjust Judge	R. Judge			18:1-8
25. Pharisee and Tax Collector	S. Tax Collector			18:9-14
26. Ten Minas	\Business			19:11-27
27. Vineyard Workers	\Laborer	20:1-16		
28. Two Sons	\(Farming)	21:28-32		
29. Wicked Tenants	T. Tenant Farmer	21:33-46	12:1-12	20:9-19
30. Wedding Feast	(U. Army)	22:1-14		
31. Ten Bridesmaids	(V. Seller/Dealer)	25:1-13		
32. Talents	\Banking	25:14-30		

Within the Greco-Roman world, households were often places of work, in which some households could be comprised of one hundred persons. The owner or landlord was called the

master, head of the house, or householder.²⁰ Others in the household included family members and relatives—such as in 1 Timothy 5:8—and then also those who labored for the master, which could include a steward/manager (“L,” Luke 16:1) or foreman (Matt 20:8), hired servants (Luke 15:17), and various unremunerated servants or slaves who usually came from neighboring countries captured during Roman conquest.²¹ Regarding slaves, Moyer Hubbard notes “The largest proportion were domestic and agricultural slaves, but the occupations of slaves were as diverse as the needs of their owners—cooks, waiters, doormen, gardeners, doctors, barbers, wet nurses, entertainers, teachers, and business managers.”²²

In light of Jesus’ own work experience, might some aspects of these stories have a personal connection? As Campbell notes,

*Jesus’ employment of stories and metaphors was based on (a) his intimate knowledge of the Scriptures; and (b) his own hard-won experience growing up on a terraced farm in Nazareth, participating in the cyclical life of the village, going to work every day, attending synagogue, and interacting with his family, clan, neighbors and strangers.*²³

For example, the parable of the two builders and two houses concludes the Sermon on the Mount.²⁴ The practice of ensuring a solid rock foundation under a house was probably an accepted building practice of the time. Imagine young Jesus working with his father, digging a foundation for a house near the sea. Jesus asks, “Is this trench deep enough, Dad?” Joseph replies, “Have you hit rock yet, son?” “No.” “Then keep on digging.” It did not pay to do shallow work on the foundation—one would need to return sometime later and fix the problems.

When Jesus teaches on the cost of discipleship, he notes that one should have the funds at the start to complete a tower.²⁵ Might Jesus have built a tower for a client who never paid? If Jesus helped build some new barns for a rich client, that experience could be the back-story for the parable of the rich fool found in Luke 12:16-21. Perhaps Jesus had wondered about that man’s relationship with God. Since most families of that day grew some of their own food and had a few animals, Jesus would have had personal experience of farming and animal husbandry on a small scale.

These work-situated parables offer a continuing reminder of Jesus’ hidden years that do not get much attention. Unless there was an infusion of moral virtue when Jesus was a baby, we can infer that Jesus’ day job—where he interacted with people and the elements of nature—played a key role in his own character formation to become the kind of person the gospels portray.²⁶

²⁰ See activity “K” in Table 2, Matt. 24:43, and Luke 12:39.

²¹ See “J,” in Table 2; Mark 13:34; Luke 12:37; 2 Kings 5:2.

²² Moyer Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2010): 191.

²³ Campbell, “Jesus’ Occupation,” 513.

²⁴ Matt. 7:24-27.

²⁵ Luke 14:28.

²⁶ Luke 2:52; Heb. 5:8.

Part Three: Considering the Three Main Workforce Sectors Today

Regarding the matter of “secular” work, let us consider some implications from Jesus’ life. To reflect on this issue, it may be helpful to borrow contemporary work categories. Today our job tasks range across a wide spectrum, classified into three main working sectors: *public* (working for government), *private not-for-profit* (civic, moral, and religious organizations), and *private for-profit* (various small and large businesses in the marketplace). Each sector has an important and distinctive contribution to make for the common good.²⁷ Based on the 2010 census data, estimates of the percentages of total US workforce across these three sectors reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics are: private for-profit, 78.5%, public, 15.1% and private not-for-profit, 6.4% (see Table 3, final row).²⁸

Table 3: Distinctive Contributions of the Three Workforce Sectors*

*2010 Census Data: Total estimated US workforce: 139 million (www.bls.gov/cps).

Sectors	Private For-Profit Marketplace	Public Government	Private Not-For-Profit
Distinct Role	Innovative and often optimal use of limited resources, within a freely cooperative and competitive market exchange to provide goods and services for customers who are willing to purchase. <i>Byproducts:</i> creating jobs; raising standards of living; paying taxes; donating to charity.	Establishing fundamental rights and rules, protecting persons and property, offering basic public services and goods which either of the two private sectors usually would not or could not provide.	<i>Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs)</i> <i>Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)</i> Various civic, moral, and religious groups organize around shared values to address issues, raising the bar for what a virtuous society and human flourishing ought to be.
Funding, Revenue Source	Voluntary customer purchases (Net profits after expenses paid)	Legally required taxes and fees	Voluntary donations (some also receive fees paid for services, such as hospitals, private schools)
Sector Entity and Taxes	Tax-Paying	Tax-Supported	Tax-Exempt
Percent of Workforce	78.5% 109,094,000 in workforce	15.1% 21,003,000	6.4% 8,968,000

Furthermore, using this contemporary framework to arrange the work activities identified by Jesus, it is possible to get a sense of their world of work from our perspective.²⁹ By adding in

²⁷ For a discussion of the important role of each sector as the “pillars of a just and abundant society,” see Victor V. Claar and Robin J. Klay (*Economics in Christian Perspective: Theory, Policy and Life Choices* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007]).

²⁸ These percentages are similar to Michael Novak’s report of the 1994 US workforce: private for-profit, 81.3%, public, 14.7%, and private not-for-profit, 4.0% (*Business as a Calling* [NY: Free Press, 1996], 42).

²⁹ For further study of the business world of Jesus’ day see Edd S. Noell, “A ‘Marketless World?’ Examination of Wealth and Exchange in the Gospels and First-Century Palestine” (*Journal of Markets and Morality*, 2007): 85-114.

two work activities Jesus' mentions in the Synoptic Gospels outside of the parables, we find fifteen roles for the private, for-profit sector, six roles for public, and three roles for the private not-for-profit sector (see Table 4).

Table 4: Twenty-Four Work Activities Mentioned by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels Arranged by the Three Contemporary Workforce Sectors

* Two additional work roles mentioned by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels outside of the parables.

Private For-Profit (15)	Public Government (16)	Private Not-For-Profit (3)
A. Building B. Business C. Banking D. Farming E. Buying [Real estate] F. Merchant G. Fishing I. Innkeeper K. Master, Householder L. Management N. Shepherd P. Laborer T. Tenant Farmer V. Seller/Dealer *W. Physician (Matt 9:12)	M. King O. Jailor R. Judge S. Tax Collector U. Army *X. Governor (Matt 10:18)	H. Temple-related (Priest, Levite) J. Servant/Slave Q. Begging

What would Jesus' own relationship have been to these three sectors? He participated himself in both private sectors. He worked in the "for-profit" sector in the building trade for almost twenty years. During his three-year public ministry, Jesus relied on the donations of others, representing the private, not-for-profit sector.³⁰ Finally, Jesus acknowledged the legitimate role of government, for example, through his word about paying taxes to Caesar for what was due.³¹ Similarly, the Apostle Paul's life experience also could affirm each sector: he worked as a leather-worker according to Acts 18:30, on occasion paying for his companions' needs, as in Acts 20:33-35. The Apostle accepted financial support from churches as described in 2 Corinthians 11:7-9, Philippians 4:15-16, and he relied on the benefits of his Roman citizenship according to Acts 16:37-38 and 22:25-27, accepting government funding and personnel for his trip to Rome to receive Caesar's judgment in Acts 25:10-12 and 27:1-2.

Brief reflection on Table 4 suggests a final comment. Each day we can cooperate with God, fulfilling our design and destiny at work. Work is a permanent feature of God's plan, not the result of the Fall into sin. Work was initiated in the Garden of Eden according to Genesis 1:28 and 2:15, and it will continue into the next age, as we serve and reign with God forever as

³⁰ Luke 8:3; Mark 15:41; John 12:6.

³¹ See Matt. 22:21. Support for the legitimacy of the public sector might also be inferred from Jesus not requiring Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, to change his profession (Luke 19:2-10).

described in Revelation 22:3-5. Yet, should the Christian community continue to maintain a hierarchy of job valuing in God's kingdom, dividing work roles into sacred (e.g., missionary first, then pastor, etc.) and then secular? Geoffrey Bromiley bemoans the "unfortunate distinction between the laity and the clergy, or the secular and the sacred, or the secular and the religious...which has caused so much mischief in both doctrine and practice."³²

If Jesus spent about twenty years as a builder, and if his words and deeds affirm the goodness of work within *each* sector, then believers can be assured they can serve God doing good work within *any* sector. Regardless of our occupations as plumber, trash collector, teacher, mechanic or pastor, we cooperate with God in doing good work, as Jesus exemplified. One motivation to work is to make money to provide for material needs and share with others.³³ But there is much more. If we wish to bring all of our life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ then our day job must be included.³⁴ Based on the New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers in 1 Peter 2:3 and 9, it could be inferred that, regardless of which sector we labor in, Jesus expects all of us to engage in full-time Christian service.³⁵ Could pastoral responsibility that prepares the saints for "the work of *ministry*" also include Christian discipleship within the marketplace for the "ministry of *work*?"³⁶ Along these lines, John Knapp proposes, "Equipping Christians for vigorous discipleship in public life may be the church's best hope for bringing the gospel to a world desperately in need of God's love."³⁷

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For further technical details regarding this topic, see Klaus Issler, "Exploring the Pervasive References to Work in Jesus' Parables," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, forthcoming 2014.

³² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Vocation," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4:995.

³³ Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13.

³⁴ Luke 9:23-26.

³⁵ Matt. 28:18-20.

³⁶ Ephesians 4:12.

³⁷ John Knapp, *How the Church Fails Businesspeople (And What Can Be Done About It)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 156.