

I Thought He Was a Carpenter!?!

Nowadays it is quite common to refer to Jesus as a carpenter from Galilee. You might even see people driving around with a bumper sticker that says, “My Boss Is a Jewish Carpenter,” by which they mean Jesus. But was Jesus really a carpenter?

They asked, “Is not this the carpenter?”

Depending on which ancient manuscript you read, the people are either asking if Jesus is a carpenter or if He is the son of a carpenter. Either way, they were asking because they were surprised to see someone whom they thought was a carpenter functioning as a rabbi. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath; in other words, he was preaching the sermon. Since they thought he was a carpenter usurping the role of a rabbi, they understandably took offence. If he were a carpenter, as they wondered, his ability to preach would be quite amazing.

The only people who thought this situation was remarkable and offensive, however, were the people who were mistaken. Obviously, the synagogue authorities allowed him to preach, which means they knew that he was not a carpenter. The New Testament calls Jesus ‘rabbi’ about 13 times. When people called Jesus “rabbi,” he never corrected them. Unless he is being deceptive, this means he is a rabbi. The New Testament calls Jesus ‘teacher’ about 47 times. Jesus refers to himself as a teacher, which is really interesting because the same gospel discloses that it uses “teacher” to mean “rabbi.”

The New Testament uses ‘teacher’ to mean ‘rabbi’. Matthew was writing in Greek, but ‘rabbi’ is an Aramaic or Hebrew word, so he explains to the reader what ‘rabbi’ means and that he uses ‘teacher’ as a translation of the title ‘rabbi.’

In the gospels, total strangers walk up to Jesus and ask him cast out demons, heal the sick, settle disputes, and probate wills. Carpenters don’t have that job description, but rabbis do. This also means, incidentally, that Jesus had to have been dressed like a rabbi; otherwise, the people wouldn’t know to ask.

In the gospels, there is no incident where a Pharisee invites Jesus to fix a wobbly table, but he overhears the dinner conversation, interrupts with his observations, and amazes them with his wisdom. That’s what would happen if he were a carpenter. Instead, the Pharisees keep inviting Jesus to dinner to discuss his teachings. So obviously the Pharisees perceive Jesus as a rabbi, because carpenters do not have teachings, but rabbis do.

In the gospels, Jesus has disciples. Carpenters don’t have disciples, but rabbis do. Matthew informs us in Matthew 23:8 that when he uses ‘teacher’ as a title, he is translating the word ‘rabbi.’ That means Jesus is calling himself a rabbi in Matthew 26:17-19. Nowhere does he call himself a carpenter.

So although it may be romantic to think of Jesus as a carpenter, it is not very scriptural. Jesus was a rabbi.

Another View:

How did Jesus' influence eventually prompt the emergence of his movement as a religion distinct from Judaism? Understanding his development permits us to identify crucial religious factors, along with economic and social conditions, that generated Christianity.

We discover what has come to be seen as the underside of Jesus' story. From the time of his birth, an emotional dialectic pushes and pulls through his life. One of the first things Jesus would have experienced as a child was rejection from Nazareth's religious community. As a *mamzer*—one who could not prove that his birth came from a licit sexual union—Jesus would not have been allowed in synagogue, not even for his own father's funeral. This rejection fueled a distrust of religious authority, as well as Jesus' desire as an adolescent to follow John the Baptist in Judea, far from his native Galilee.

With John, Jesus learned both a distinctive program of immersion (or baptism), typical of the Judaism of the period, and a tradition of meditation on the moving Throne of God, the *Merkavah* which the Hebrew Prophets had described. The *Merkavah* was the source of the Spirit of God, and John believed that his immersion brought access to that Spirit. In a painful break from John just prior to his teacher's death, Jesus taught that God's Spirit--and with it the all powerful force of his kingdom, which would one day replace all human hegemony--could be experienced apart from baptism, in the mealtime fellowship of Israelites. In his years as a rabbi, however, Jesus was not setting out to subvert or discredit Judaism, something that many Christians and Jews today believe. While he had contact with non-Jews throughout his life, Jesus was generally suspicious of gentiles and struggled to balance this xenophobia with his intuition that human beings, in the image of God, were pure by virtue of their God-given Spirit.

Yet Jesus did want to change Judaism. It was his actions on this front—like the riot in the Temple, an attempt to enact the prophecy of Zechariah—that led to his death at the prodding of the High Priest Caiaphas, whose successful manipulation of Pontius Pilate is described in detail on the basis of Jewish and Roman sources. Crucial within that unfolding of events was Jesus' declaration that the wine and bread served to his disciples during his last meals with them were his own sacrifice. In the Aramaic sense of his words, Jesus designated the wine he shared as the blood of sacrifice, and his bread the flesh which God preferred to what was offered in a corrupt Temple. The blasphemy he was accused of by many in Jerusalem, even some of his own followers, was a natural consequence of what he said.

Commentary on Matthew 9: 18-26

In comparison to the story of the Woman with the Flow of Blood in Mark and Luke, Matthew is very brief. Matthew's omission of details serves to highlight the person and authority of Jesus.

This type of female disorder would have made the woman ritually unclean and defiling to others (Leviticus 15: 19-33), which helps to explain her seeking to make contact with Jesus unobtrusively.

Throughout chapters 8-9, Matthew's dominant interest is Jesus' authority. The woman's expression of faith (if I *only touch...*) and the fact that the actual healing takes place

“from the moment’ when Jesus addresses her, rather than from the moment she touches him, underscores the fact that the woman’s faith is the *instrument* of healing, not the *cause*. It is Jesus’ authoritative pronouncement *about* her faith that saves, not the faith itself. Again Jesus cleanses the defiled one, rather than being himself defiled by the touch of the unclean.

In the telling of the Ruler’s Daughter, Matthew again highlights the figure of Jesus by omitting details found in the other Gospels.

Luke and Mark reveal the father is a “ruler of the synagogue”, presumably in Capernaum named Jairus. With no apparent record of such a miracle, Jairus believes that Jesus’ mere touch will *raise the dead*. Jesus responds to Jarius’ request by going with him. Upon entering the house, Jesus finds “the flute players and the noisy crowd’. Even the poorest families of the time hired at least two flute players and one female wailer for funerals. The “noisy crowd” was made up of friends mourning, not in the hushed whispers characteristic of our Western funerals, but in loud outbursts of grief and wailing augmented by cries of hired mourners. That a “crowd” is present, points to the influence of the synagogue ruler.

Verse 24 does not deny the reality of death but expresses Jesus’ confidence in his power to awaken the ruler’s daughter from death. Again, Matthew is remarkably brief: Jesus’ mere touch raises her, news of which spreads rapidly.

Matthews collection of healing miracles ends with Verse 34—juxtaposing two contrasting responses to Jesus’ work as a healer.

The crowd is amazed over his power. The Pharisees, by contrast, ascribe his authority to Satan—a foretaste for Chapter 12: 22-32 where Jesus knows the Pharisees think he can cast out demons because their ruler is Beelzebul, who also gives Jesus his power to do so. Jesus admonishes the Pharisees saying, “Anyone who is not for me is really against me...” and tells them that saying evil things against the Holy Spirit cannot, and will not, be forgiven.