

Question: Can you give some examples of day to day life in the 1st century Mediterranean world in which the New Testament was written?

Answer: The world in which the New Testament came about is very different from the one we experience here in the 21st century. To answer this question adequately I will go through some of the more important aspects of the 1st century world in the next few weeks focusing on those activities central to life in the Galilee region where Jesus spent most of his time.

Jobs: More of a necessity than trades of choice, those living in the Galilee region not wealthy elites, either farmed or fished. The whole region of Galilee (the Northern area of present day Israel around the Sea of Galilee) was considered to be the breadbasket of Palestine. Flavius Josephus commented in the 1st century that the Galilee region's "Soil is universally rich and fruitful, and full of the plantations of trees of all sorts" (*Jewish Wars* 3.516-517). Many people in the Galilee region farmed the countryside. Farming was a difficult task for anyone in the first century, yet, people managed to produce grapes, figs, olives, wheat, and other cereal crops (Anchor Bible Dictionary, *Galilee*). Due to taxes, elite city dwelling land owners, the threat of debt, and the pressures of the Romans Empire, many risks were involved in farming during the 1st century.

The men Jesus recruited to follow him were for the most part fishermen. Fishing on the Sea of Galilee is much different than typical lake fishing. The fish the disciples would have consumed themselves and sold to other Jewish people would have been caught with nets. Hooks and rods would not have done any good as the majority of quality commercial fish in the lake are filter feeders. To catch these fish, men like the disciples would have used nets made of linen or cotton (Nun, *Cast*, 48). Unlike modern fishers on the lake who use synthetic and nearly invisible fibers, fishers in Jesus' time with their thick and visible nets would have had to fish at night to reduce net visibility in the water.

To make significant catches and lug the heavy nets around the sea, fishers like Peter would have had a crew of several men and a fairly good sized boat for the job. Until recently the types of vessels used on the Sea of Galilee were not clearly defined. This changed in 1986 with the discovery of a boat buried in the mud on the shoreline. After careful study, the boat was determined to be about 2,000 years old. Because of a lack of large trees in the region able to produce adequate beams for boat construction, quality wood for boat construction would have been sparse and expensive. As a result, fishers would recycle beams, nails, and any other salvageable materials from retired vessels. The boat the disciples would have used would have been fairly good sized: 8x26 feet. It would have had an anchor and sail and the capacity to stay afloat with several men and heavy nets aboard.

Life on the lake is brought up several times in the gospels. As Jesus is walking along the lakeside he sees Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea (Mark 1:18). They likely were using cast nets, which are small nets with long ropes attached. The cast net was used from the lakeshore, thrown, and then retrieved at the lake bottom. Jesus also calls James and John as they are mending their nets in their boat. They too follow Jesus leaving their father in the boat (Mark 1:19-20). In some ways, this helps modern scholars understand what the fishing world would have been like in Jesus' time. Details like the fact that James, John, and their father Zebedee are in the boat together mending nets might indicate fishing to be a family affair. As a family, there would have been shared financial and time responsibilities to maintain nets (an especially difficult task on the rocky floor of the Sea of Galilee) and keep the boat in a condition adequate for both sailing and hauling fish.

Without modern means to keep large catches of fish fresh, many innovative ways were developed in the Mediterranean. For example, recent archaeological discoveries at places like Tel Tanninim and Kursi have revealed ceramic pools fed by fresh water that would have held live fish. This was the ancient substitute for modern refrigeration. Also, the town of Migdal, where Mary Magdalene came from was famous for its fish salting and pickling techniques; so well done, pickled fish were shipped from Migdal throughout the entire Roman Empire (Freyne, *Galilee and Gospel*, 100-101).

Many teachings and miracles happen while Jesus and the disciples are on the lake. Jesus walks on water to the boat in which the disciples are sailing (Mark 6:49). He also commands Peter to cast his nets overboard once more for a catch (Luke 5:4). Upon doing so, Peter and his fishing comrades catch a huge amount of fish to the point their nets begin to tear (Luke 5:6-7). Jesus also directs Peter to go to the lake and take the first fish that he catches and open its mouth, there he finds a coin worth twice the temple tax, which enables him to pay the tax both he and Jesus owe (Matthew 17:27).

Based on New Testament sources, we know that Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3). What would a carpenter have done in the 1st century? Our modern understanding of carpentry does not reflect the work Jesus would have done during his lifetime (Cultural Dictionary of the Bible, *Work*). As a carpenter in the 1st century, Jesus would have rarely used or worked with wood. As already mentioned, quality wood was not a common commodity in the region. As a carpenter, Jesus likely would have worked primarily with stone. Because stone was the most readily available construction material, it was used for the building of almost all houses and other structures.