

Carpenter for Torah Scholar

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Languages are full of idiomatic expressions that add flavor and variety to conversations. But taking the meaning of the words literally conceals the true meaning of the expression so that we fail to understand the intent of the words used until we understand the expression. Failure to understand correctly means we misunderstand. Once we understand the intended meaning of a word or phrase used idiomatically, we have a new perspective of the circumstances where that word or phrase is used. The Hebrew language is no exception to using idiomatic expressions that make the language more colorful. This feature of languages makes it more difficult to translate the intended meanings of words or phrases used idiomatically. Such is the case with the notion that Jesus was a carpenter, that He made His living by the skillful art of wood working and fashioning furniture.

In Hebrew, the term for *skilled craftsman* or *carpenter* is commonly used euphemistically or idiomatically in reference to a *Torah scholar*. In the Jerusalem Talmud it is written, “This is something that no carpenter nor a son of a carpenter can explain.”¹ The word for *carpenter* in this passage is נגד (nagar), and is a reference to those individuals who were well known for being skilled in sorting out conflicting information, especially with respect to religious issues. This same concept is also expressed in the Babylonian Talmud.² This word is not catalogued in biblical concordances because it is not found in scripture, but being found in both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud certainly makes it a Second Temple period word with which the Jews were familiar.

The concept of a skilled craftsman being equated with scholarly intellect is not unique to the New Testament era; at least one passage from the Old Testament supports this concept also. The description of the procedure for bringing the first fruits as described in Deuteronomy 26:1-11 is given in the Mishnah of Bikkurim. A brief description is found in the following extract from that source.³

- Chapter 3; Mishnah 3

Those who came from near to Yerushalayim would bring figs and grapes (because they would not be spoiled on a short journey); those who came from far from Yerushalayim would bring dried figs and raisins.

An ox went before them with its horns overlaid with gold, and a crown of olive leaves was upon its head. The flute was played before them until they approached Yerushalayim. When they came close to Yerushalayim, they sent messengers before them, and they would decorate their First-Fruits.

The governors, the chiefs and the treasurers went out to meet them. According to the rank of the arrivals, was the rank of those who came out to greet them. And **all the craftsmen** of Yerushalayim would stand before them and inquire concerning their welfare, ‘Our brothers, from Place So-and-So, welcome!’ [Bold added.]

The Hebrew phrase that is translated as *all the craftsmen* here is בְּעָלֵי אֹמְנוּיֹת (BA’ALAY OMANUYOT), literally meaning *masters of arts*. In this setting, the masters of arts were the priests of the Tabernacle who greeted the people as they arrived at the LORD’s appointed place of worship

three times a year. Of all the people in Israel, it was the responsibility of the priests to be most familiar with the scriptures, to be the Torah scholars, and these are the very ones who are referred to in the Mishnah as the craftsmen. The connection between the *master of arts*, the *Torah scholar*, and the *craftsman* in the context of Second Temple period Judaism is unmistakable: the craftsman is a master of arts who is a Torah scholar. This *master of arts* sounds strikingly similar to a Master of Arts degree one can earn from a university graduate school in our day. Moreover, actors and others who are primarily engaged in public speaking or performance develop their *craft* through practice. Being a *craftsman* means striving to do error free work and being as professional as possible. It means being the best there can be.

When Jesus is referred to as the *son of a carpenter* in Matthew 13:55, does this mean that Joseph was a craftsman of wood as is usually understood by the term *carpenter*, or does it mean that this man was well versed in scripture, skilled in the artful use of words and thoughts, that he was skilled in presenting information in such a way that apparent conflicts in theology would be resolved, that he was recognized as a *Torah scholar*? When Jesus Himself is referred to as a *carpenter* in Mark 6:3, does this mean that He had taken up the craft of a wood worker, or is this an acknowledgment that Jesus was well versed in scripture, skilled in the artful use of words and thoughts, that He was skilled in explaining the intricacies of religious problems and resolving conflicts in understanding religious issues, that He was a *Torah scholar*?

The earliest Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew available to us today, Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew⁴ which predates the fourteenth century and relies on Jewish scribes and traditions rather than the Latin Vulgate or Greek, renders verse 13:55a as "(Is this) not the son of the smith and Mary?" The Hebrew root word for *smith* in this verse is נפח (naphach) and Brown-Driver-Briggs⁵ gives the primary meaning as *breathe* and a secondary meaning of *blow*. Uses of this word provided therein indicate that fire is associated with it and conjures up images of a bellows pumping air into the black smith's fire or the smelting furnace. It takes oxygen to have viable breath or fire, and this word might have an equal application in either context. It is not strongly associated with the word *carpenter* as someone who saws lumber or provides a blow to a nail with a hammer. The fact that *breathe* is the primary meaning indicates that this has something to do with human breath or God's breath. Of course, human breath is the basis for human speech and God's breath is the basis for His having brought forth life by the words He spoke. It is entirely compatible with the meaning of this word that Mary's husband was not so much a smith, craftsman, or carpenter in the literal sense, but was a teacher and Torah scholar, a word smith, one who used his God-given breath to lead others to understand God better and accept His invitation to become the friend of God.

Just as apples don't fall far from the tree, so Joseph would serve as an excellent role model for Jesus to learn the importance of handling scripture properly and leading the people in a right understanding regarding the character of His heavenly Father and the principles of the kingdom of heaven. From heaven's perspective, there could be no greater attribute than this that would qualify a mortal man to become the Earthly father of the heaven-sent Messiah.

Jesus certainly demonstrated his mastery of scripture as He engaged the religious leaders or taught the people in so many instances during His ministry. As a young man of twelve years of age, Jesus understood the scriptures in ways that amazed the very best Torah scholars in Jerusalem.⁶ Even His parents were amazed when they saw Him there.⁷ Not having been educated in the schools of the Jews,⁸ He obviously had a solid foundation in understanding the scriptures from his parents at home. Luke makes the same statement about the development of Jesus as is made about the

development of Samuel who learned about the LORD by spending his formative years under the care of Eli, the high priest.⁹ As the high priest of Israel, Eli was responsible for the correct handling and interpretation of the Word of God, and would certainly be recognized as an authority on the Torah.

Throughout His life, Jesus was known as one whose ministry amazed those who encountered Him. At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, the people were amazed at His teaching because He taught as one having authority and not as the scribes and Pharisees.¹⁰ As Jesus was gathering His disciples, He went to Capernaum and taught at the synagogue one Sabbath, and they marveled at His teaching because He taught as one who had authority and not as the scribes.¹¹ In Decapolis, Jesus healed the deaf and dumb man so he could hear and speak, and the people were astonished at how well He did everything.¹² The disciples were dumbfounded when they heard Jesus explain that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.¹³ The crowds were amazed at His teaching when He explained to the Sadducees that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of the living and not the dead.¹⁴ In the Temple, Jesus upset the money changers and wouldn't allow anyone to carry any goods through the Temple. While the scribes and chief priests were afraid of Him, all the people were amazed at His teaching.¹⁵ After coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration experience, Jesus healed the boy with the demon and the people were astonished at the mighty power of God.¹⁶ In all these passages it appears that the common people were not only astonished and overwhelmed by what Jesus said and did, they were drawn to Him because of it. Their typical reaction was “the glad amazement of the wondering people.”¹⁷

However, in Nazareth, where Jesus had grown up, there was no joy over His amazing teaching. While they acknowledged His teaching as amazing and wise, they questioned where the wisdom and miracles came from and were offended by Him.¹⁸ They knew Jesus and his entire blended family, and for those who raised the questions it suggests that no member of that humble family could ever be a conduit through which heaven would bless them with wisdom and miracles. They thought of themselves as better than His family, which is what led them to question where *He* got this wisdom — as if God could bless only those whom they had pre-approved. Their questioning was not based on respect or glad amazement, but on jealousy and contempt. Their recognition that Jesus was the *son of a carpenter* may have been a snide reference to the manual labor Joseph performed for a living, but it is more likely a sarcastic reference to Joseph's interpretation of scripture and his teaching that was out of compliance with the teaching of the religious leaders from Jerusalem. They had been teaching that the Messiah would overthrow the Romans just as Moses had led the people of Israel out of Egypt. Jesus, of course, correctly followed in His father's footsteps and taught a much more important type of freedom — the freedom from sin and how to live a life of righteousness. The questions raised by the people of Nazareth were not a search for clarity to increase their understanding and strengthen their belief in God, but were based on disbelief and jealousy. Theirs was an attempt to denigrate and diminish the influence of Jesus. Jesus was amazed at their unbelief and did not perform many miracles there.

It was in Nazareth, where He had been brought up, that He experienced the third recorded attempt to take His life.¹⁹ He had been invited to present the Sabbath sermon and, after reading one of the Messianic prophecies from the Isaiah scroll, He taught them that the work of the Messiah was to preach the Gospel to the poor, announce release to the captives, restore sight to the blind, set free the downtrodden, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. As He shared with them the vision their heavenly Father had for their lives and how they should grow into His righteousness, they wondered

at His gracious words, but began to question his family affiliation. Reading their faces, He pointed out how a prophet is not accepted in his own hometown, how one day they will reject Him by saying “Physician, heal yourself.” He went on to point out that their ancestors had been so resistant to God’s leading that Elijah was sent to live with the widow of Sarepta of Sidon outside the territory of Israel, and that Elisha had healed none in Israel, but had healed Naaman the Syrian. Elijah had ministered during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, a time of great wickedness in Israel. Elisha had ministered directly after Elijah when the people were just as rebellious and wicked. The congregation in Nazareth became deeply resentful that Jesus would compare them with their rebellious ancestors and imply that their ancestor’s lack of love and faithfulness for God was now evident in themselves. They sought to take His life. They expelled Him from the city and led Him to the cliff to hurl Him down, thereby rejecting God’s influence in their lives and verifying that what He had said to them was obviously true. But before they could throw Him down, He made His way straight through their midst, leaving them on their own to contemplate what had just happened.

It should be remembered that Joseph was a displaced member of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, living in Nazareth in Galilee at the time he and Mary became betrothed.²⁰ While Joseph and his family were living in Egypt after the birth of Jesus, having fled there to escape Herod’s decree, God gave him a dream to return to Israel because those who sought to take His life had died. Because Joseph did not trust Herod’s son, Archelaus, who ruled Judah after Herod died, he decided to settle back in Nazareth as a safe haven for the rearing of Jesus.²¹ If Joseph had originally settled in Nazareth to be involved in the construction work that was available around the Roman garrison a short distance away, it must be remembered that the terms *carpenter* and *skilled craftsman* also apply to one who was well versed in scripture and skilled at explaining it. The references to Joseph and Jesus being carpenters may very well have a double meaning: they both may have been handy with the saw and hammer, and may have made their living building homes and furniture part of the time, but the more significant meaning is that they were sources of spiritual enrichment for those who sought and valued their insights and encouragement. The apparent sarcasm of some of the neighbors in Nazareth indicates that they considered the teachings of Joseph and Jesus to be somewhat outside the mainstream of community life and belief. But the ease with which Jesus handled the scriptures and taught the people in the synagogue²² indicates He was skilled in handling the scriptures, experienced at teaching in the synagogue, gifted at reading the faces of His audience, and had often been in that place as a regular synagogue teacher. He had taught in other synagogues all around and been lauded by everyone.²³ But in the town of His youth, He and His message were rejected and despised.

Regardless of whether Jesus was an actual wood craftsman, He was certainly the best Torah scholar who ever lived. Under what conditions would a simple wood craftsman be invited to present the Sabbath teaching in the synagogue unless he was recognized as a competent teacher of the holy scriptures?²⁴ This idiomatic expression has been so completely overlooked that most Christians think of Jesus as a simple man who was engaged in manual labor until the age of about thirty who had had little opportunity to learn the intricacies of scripture. But if His Earthly father, Joseph, was a Torah scholar, then He would have grown up in a home rich in the discussions and study of the word of God as well as the religious traditions of the Hebrew people. Rather than having to go to the synagogue to study,²⁵ the scriptures would have been available for Jesus to use right in the comfort of His parents’ home where His parents would be His teachers, which was the LORD’s plan for education and socialization of children given through Moses.²⁶ Moreover, Joseph, having been

told before the birth of Jesus that Mary's son would be the Messiah, certainly would have devoted special study to gain a thorough understanding of all the Messianic prophecies in scripture so he could help Jesus comprehend His role regarding the fulfillment of those prophecies. It was the study of the scriptures that Jesus relied on that gave Him the confidence that He would suffer and die and be resurrected after the third day. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus referred to "everything the prophets have spoken" to help them clarify that the scriptures foretold that the Messiah would have to suffer all this before He could enter His glory.²⁷

When the Father and Son chose Mary and Joseph to be the Earthly parents of the Messiah, they chose a pious couple whose lot in life was humble and whose dedication to the God of scripture was central to their thinking. Both Mary and Joseph highly valued God's will for their lives and their family, and did their best to provide a loving atmosphere in which Jesus and His siblings would grow strong in their knowledge of and faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus developed the skill of carefully crafting the principles expressed in scripture to bring new insights to light about their God. In this sense, the reference that Jesus was a *carpenter* was not a job He had done in the past and left behind, but is a reference to His great skill at revealing insights about God in scripture²⁸ and was the euphemistic, idiomatic catchword of His entire ministry.

Jesus was not merely a charismatic Jewish leader who attracted crowds by performing miracles of healing or feeding, He was foremost a Torah teacher who taught the people a broader, deeper, and accurate understanding of the Father and presented a vision of life that calls for a purposeful spiritual life-faith experience. He pointed to the Father's behavior as a role model for our behavior and encouraged His listeners to grow into His righteousness.²⁹ This is exactly the teaching Moses gave the people of Israel when the LORD told Moses to instruct the people to be holy because He is holy,³⁰ that their priests were to be holy when they followed the LORD's instructions³¹ and their festivals are holy when they observe them as instructed by the LORD.³² They were to be separate from the people of the surrounding nations who worshiped idols,³³ yet they were to lead these people into a knowledge of their God so the Gentiles could become part of their community.³⁴

Not only was Jesus an excellent Torah scholar and teacher, He is the essence of Torah teaching and scholarship. His life embodied the illustration of teaching the Torah and living by the Torah. In one sense He gave His life to illustrate the full meaning of the love of God. To meet Jesus is to see the will of the Father displayed in everyday life that is pleasing to the God of the Universe.

Endnotes

1. Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 7b and 66a. The Jerusalem Talmud has not been translated into English, but these passages have been translated for this article by Rivi Litvin, president of The Hope of Israel Ministries in Corona, California. "This is something that no carpenter nor a son of a carpenter can explain." The word נָגַר (nagar) literally means *carpenter* or *craftsman*, but is an idiomatic expression for a *scholar*.

2. Babylonian Talmud, Translated by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein, Jew's College/Soncino English translation, Tractate 'Aboda Zarah 50. "R. Joseph b. Abba said: Rabbah b. Jeremiah once visited our town. When he came he brought with him this teaching: If an idolater took stones from a Mercurius and paved roads and streets with them, they are permitted;¹ if an Israelite took stones from a Mercurius and paved roads and streets with them, they are prohibited; [and he added that] there was no scholar² or scholar's son³ who could elucidate this teaching.⁴ R. Shesheth said: I am neither a scholar nor a scholar's son, yet I can elucidate it. What is the difficulty?" Brackets in the quote are Dr. Epstein's. The footnote #2 for *scholar* states: "Lit., 'skilled artisan', i.e., an ordained Rabbi." The footnote #3 for *scholar's son* states: "A Rabbinical student." There is no question in the mind of the Jewish translators that the Hebrew word for *skilled craftsman* is also applied to one who is a *scholar*, and that the *son of a scholar* is a *rabbinic student*. The Hebrew word is נָגַר (nagar). Dr. Epstein's English translation of The Babylonian Talmud can be found online at <http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud>.
3. Mishna of Bikkurim, Chapter 3; Mishnah 3, <http://www.ou.org/chagim/shavuot/bring.htm>.
4. Howard, George. Hebrew Gospel of Matthew. Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1995, pp. 66-67.
5. Brown, Francis. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 2003, pp. 655-656.
6. Luke 2:41-52.
7. Luke 2:48.
8. John 7:15.
9. Compare Luke 2:52 with 1 Samuel 2:26.
10. Matthew 7:28.
11. Mark 1:33 and Luke 4:32.
12. Mark 7:37.
13. Matthew 19:25 and Mark 10:26.
14. Matthew 22:33.
15. Mark 11:15-18.
16. Luke 9:43.
17. Thayer, Joseph H. Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 2003, pp. 198-199, ἐκπλήσσωζ.
18. Matthew 13:54-58 and Mark 6:2-6.
19. Luke 4:16-30. The first recorded attempt to take His life was the decree issued by Herod to kill all the male babies in the area of Bethlehem. Matthew 2:13-18. The temptation to throw Himself off the Temple pinnacle is the second recorded attempt to take His life. Matthew 4:5-7 and Luke 4:9-12.
20. Luke 1:27 and 2:1-5.
21. Matthew 2:22-23 and Luke 2:39.
22. Luke 4:17-20.
23. Luke 4:15, 44.
24. Luke 4:16.

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25. The books of scripture were in scrolls in those days and were relatively expensive so that few families could afford to have any. Some families might have a few scrolls in the home, but most scripture study was done in the evening at the synagogue.
 26. Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:4-9, 20-25; & 11:18-23.
 27. Luke 24:25-26.
 28. John 17:4, 6. On the walk to Gethsemane, Jesus stated that had completed the work the Father gave Him to do, which was to demonstrate and make known the name of the Father. One's name carries with it the reputation, which is an indication of one's character. Jesus wanted us to get to know God and what He is like.
 29. Matthew 5:48, Luke 6:36, John 14:15, Ephesians 1:4 & 5:27, and Revelation 22:11.
 30. Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; Numbers 15:40, and Deuteronomy 23:14.
 31. Leviticus 21:6-8.22:11.
 32. Leviticus 23:2.
 33. Leviticus 20:26.
 34. Numbers 15:15, Romans 10:12, Galatians 3:28, and Luke 2:32.