

THE WORLD JESUS KNEW

**A CURIOUS KID'S GUIDE TO
LIFE IN THE FIRST CENTURY**

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SPARK
HOUSE
FAMILY

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THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY

Every society has some sort of structure, an unspoken set of rules about how that society functions. Who's in charge? Who gets what from whom? How do people live together in a way that makes sense? In Jesus' time, the answers were very clear: one group of people got a lot, and everyone else had to help them get it.

First-century Palestine was a place of huge inequalities when it came to things like power and wealth. So think of the social structure like a pyramid, with a few groups of people at the tiny top who enjoy the benefits of the work done by the many groups of people at the bottom.



Wealth and power moved from the bottom to the top of the pyramid—the higher you were, the more of both you had. And the people in the middle were stuck squabbling about who was more important in an effort to grab a little of each as they clawed their way up.

Most of the people who lived in Jesus' time were very poor and had very little power (we'll call them peasants and slaves), while a few were very wealthy and had the power to make decisions that affected everybody else (we'll refer to them as elites). The peasants and slaves worked hard, growing and tending crops, fishing, or herding animals. The elites, who owned and controlled the land and lakes, did not work themselves but earned money from the work of the peasants by charging them taxes, rents, and tributes. In between the elites and the peasants and slaves were people who collected taxes, as well as a class of artisans who had special skills like stone cutting, weaving, and pottery.



This social structure was in place no matter where someone lived. Cities, like Caesarea and Tiberias, were built under the direction of rulers as a way of getting favors from the emperors for whom they named the cities. The labor and wealth of the countryside was exploited (used to an unfair extent) to build and maintain cities and to supply all the needs (and wants) of the elites who lived in them.

Rural areas were divided into big estates and owned mostly by city dwellers. They were operated by peasants and slaves.

THE ROMAN EMPEROR

This guy (it was always a man) held all the power—and shared or gave it away only when it suited his interests.

RULERS

King Herod, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip, Pilate

ELITES

Soldiers, Priests, Land Owners, Tax Collectors

Jesus' ministry touched and troubled these groups most of all.

PEASANTS

Artisans, Farmers, Fishers, Herders, Workers

SLAVES

Household Slaves, Day Laborers



These families made alliances and deals with each other.

These families competed for friendship and recognition from the rulers. They controlled most of the land, fishing rights, and ways of getting crops to market. Their wealth came from the work of the peasants.

These folks recognized they had a pretty bad deal. They worked on land they didn't own, they didn't get to keep most of what they harvested or herded, and on top of that—they had to pay rent! They paid the taxes that they had to but also looked for ways to cheat the system.

Jesus came from this part of society. Our best guess is that 85-90 percent of the population of Palestine at the time of Jesus was part of the peasant class and worked at farming, fishing, and herding, as well as processing grain, fruit, fish, meat, and wool.

Slaves and day laborers were so deep in debt that they had to work for others without getting paid. These people owned very little.

Denarius (silver coin)

Aureus (gold coin)

Sestertius (brass coin)

CURRENCY



Grapes for wine



Olive oil



Wheat

Wealth from produce and labor
Favors, gifts, protection

Loyalty, tributes

In this system, you could move sideways or down, but you never moved up to a new level.

THE ROMAN ARMY

The Romans were really good at being an empire. They built great roads, figured out how to bring fresh water into cities, and had an amazing and scary army. The Roman military was disciplined, dangerous, and impressive. They had the swords and knew how to use them. From the time General Pompey

conquered the region in 63 BCE until the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, the Roman military was visible throughout Palestine. Jesus' whole life was spent in the presence of an occupying army.

Auxiliaries

Once an area became part of the empire, the Roman army recruited local people to serve as soldiers. Non-citizens couldn't become legionaries (below), but they could be part of the army as auxiliaries. Auxiliaries were trained in the Roman way and got some equipment. They were paid less than normal soldiers but could become citizens if they survived to retirement.

A Legionary

1

The Roman infantry soldier. He was usually a Roman citizen and signed up for 25 years of service. He was provided all his weapons, armor, and gear, and was paid 255 silver denarii, basically a starting salary, each year.

A Contubernia

8

Made up of eight soldiers. These eight guys did everything together.

1 contubernia = 8 legionaries

Soldiers ate together, made camp, hauled water, gathered firewood, and fought beside each other.

A Century

80

Made up of around 80 soldiers (despite the name).

1 century = 10 contuberniae

Each century was commanded by an officer, called a centurion, and his assistant, called the optio.

A Cohort

500

Made up of around 500 soldiers. The first cohort in each legion was special, and had around 1,000 members.

1 cohort = 6 centuries

Senior centurions commanded cohorts.

A Legion

5000

Made up of around 5,000 soldiers, plus supporting troops (called auxiliaries) and cavalry (soldiers on horseback).

1 legion = 10 cohorts

Each legion had a special commanding officer, called the legate.

During the time of Jesus, Rome had up to thirty legions deployed throughout the empire (more than 150,000 fighting men). In Palestine, several cohorts of auxiliary troops kept the peace, served as police, and reminded everybody who was in charge.

A ROMAN CENTURION

The Roman army developed a reputation for producing professional soldiers who knew about building, diplomacy, and government, as well as fighting. Centurions were commanding officers. They were Roman citizens who made careers as tough soldiers who led by example. Centurions trained troops and commanded groups of eighty soldiers (a century). Centurions brought the powerful presence of the empire wherever they went.

In Palestine, senior centurions commanded 1,000 or so auxiliaries—soldiers who were recruited from Syria and Samaria. Centurions taught them how to be soldiers and enforced the rules of Roman military life—which sometimes included beating them with a cane made of vine wood.

Centurions in Judea were part of the elite class and often had families who lived with them. They were paid fifteen times what a regular soldier earned in a year. They were a big deal.



- A. Dyed horsehair
- B. Sideways horsehair crest on helmet
- C. Helmet
- D. A cloak of fine cloth
- E. Leather or metal breastplate
- F. Medals for bravery in battle
- G. Pila
- H. Dagger on right side
- I. Gladius/sword on left side
- J. Scutum
- K. Wooden vine wood cane used to beat subordinates
- L. Spiked caligae for marching

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Roman Laws

These laws were administered by the governor or prefect of the Roman province of Judea. This person had the power of life and death over every person in the province. Major cases, like murder or insurrection, were heard by the prefect. More minor cases were heard by magistrates appointed by the prefect. Pontius Pilate was prefect of Judea from 26 to 36 CE.

Crime

Minor

- Theft
- Fraud

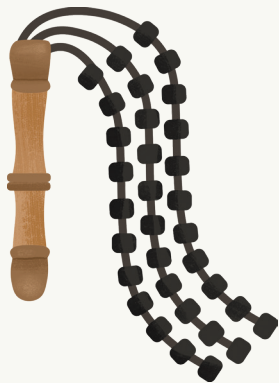
Major

- Robbery
- Arson
- Murder
- Rioting
- Stealing from the temple
- Insurrection or treason

Punishment

Prison wasn't used as punishment in the ancient world, but as a place to put people who were awaiting trial or sentencing. In general, the more serious the crime, the more serious the punishment. Among the Romans, most punishments were harsh, and included:

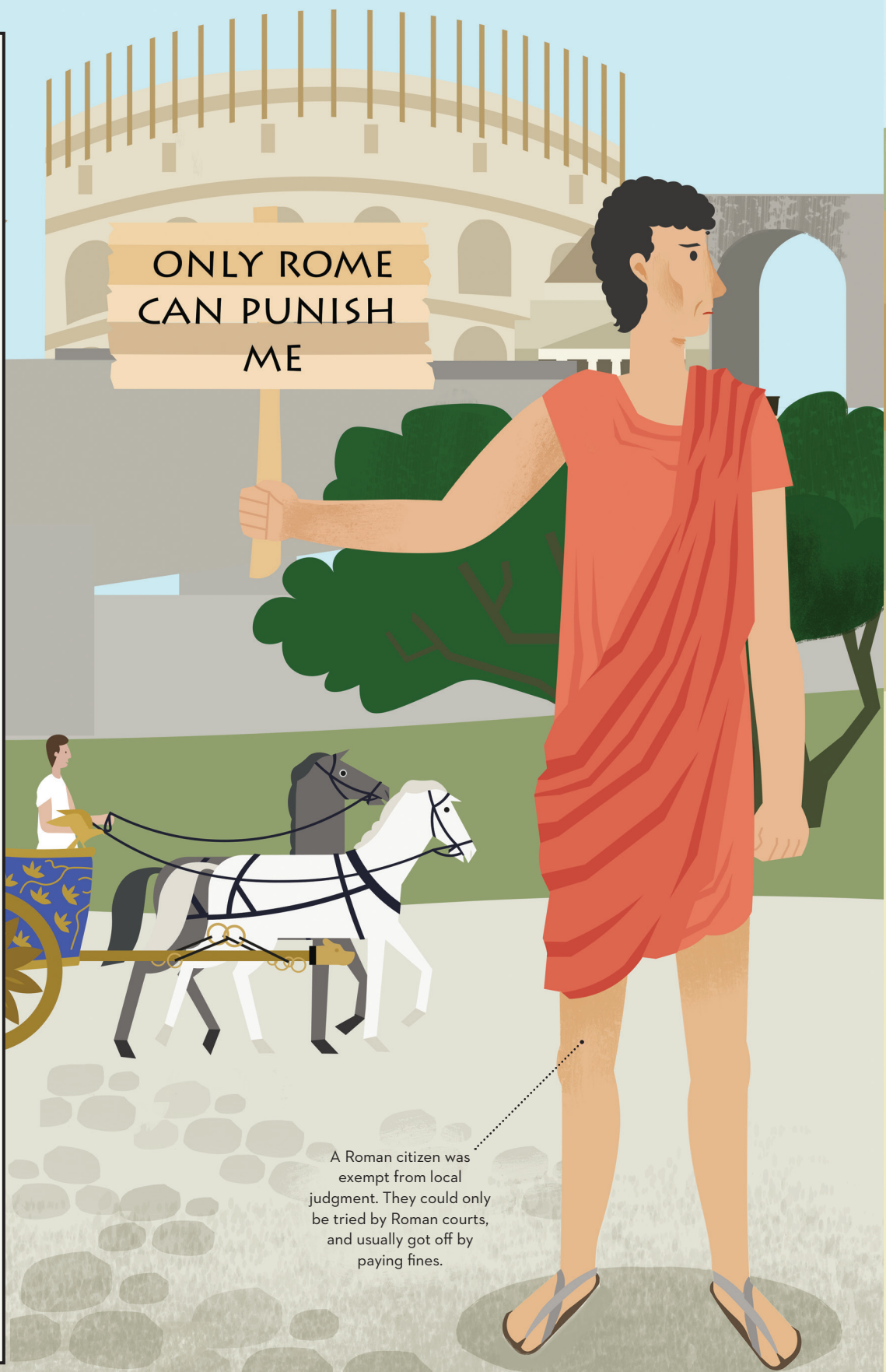
- Fines
- Enslavement
- Beating or whipping
- Execution
- Exile



The Romans used a **scourge**, or whip, to beat convicts. It was called a **flagellum**, and had lead weights on the ends of leather straps. Romans would also beat criminals with a bundle of birch rods.

Any crime committed by a slave could end in execution. Slaves had very few legal rights. Sometimes, if one slave in a household was convicted of a crime, all of the slaves in the house were executed!

The Latin word for prison or prison cell is **carcer**. We get the word **incarceration** directly from the Romans.



A Roman citizen was exempt from local judgment. They could only be tried by Roman courts, and usually got off by paying fines.

GETTING AROUND

Land travel in ancient Palestine was always by foot. If you were a regular person, you hoofed it on your own two feet. If you had the means, you got to use the power and energy supplied by other people or animals.

Mostly people walked. They used paths between homes within villages, and trails and paths between towns. There was usually more than one way to get somewhere. Well-worn roads between cities and larger towns linked to the impressive, paved Roman road system. A walking person leading a loaded donkey could go about three miles an hour and cover about twenty-three miles in a day.

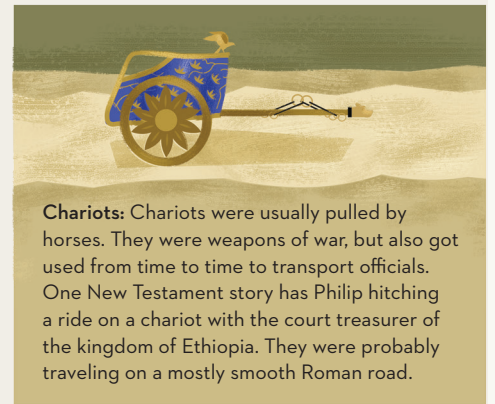
People traveled to visit relatives, to sell and buy goods that weren't available locally, and to participate in religious holidays and festivals. Jews celebrated three pilgrimage festivals during the year, in which families traveled from their homes throughout the land to the Holy City of Jerusalem and its temple. These three festivals—**Passover**, **Shavuot**, and **Sukkoth**—required the faithful to journey to Jerusalem and stay there for the length of the festival, usually a few days. Often whole villages of people traveled to these festivals together.



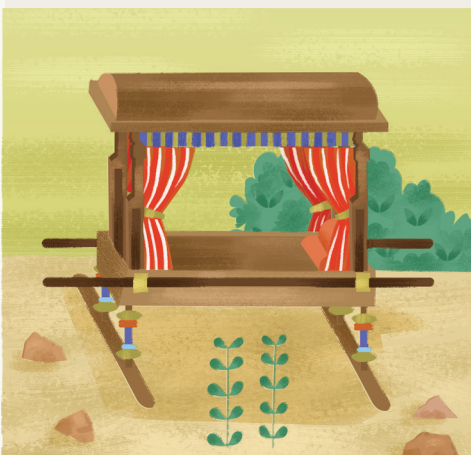
Horses: Most of the horses in the time of Jesus were used for military or government purposes. Rumor has it King Herod the Great had six thousand horses in his cavalry. Official messengers on horseback, using the Roman roads and switching horses at intervals, could travel hundreds of miles in just a few days.



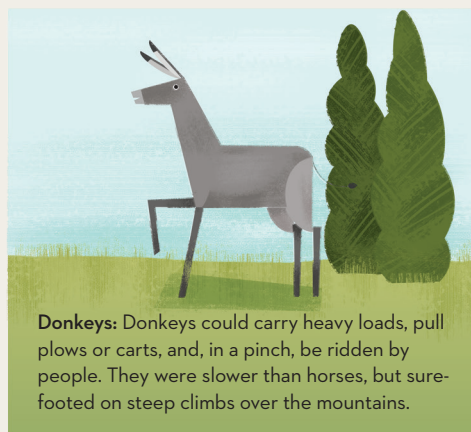
Camels: Camels could carry riders, and endure dryness and heat. They also spit, bit, and were usually even slower than walking. Camels were very good long-distance cargo haulers. And did we mention the spitting?



Chariots: Chariots were usually pulled by horses. They were weapons of war, but also got used from time to time to transport officials. One New Testament story has Philip hitching a ride on a chariot with the court treasurer of the kingdom of Ethiopia. They were probably traveling on a mostly smooth Roman road.



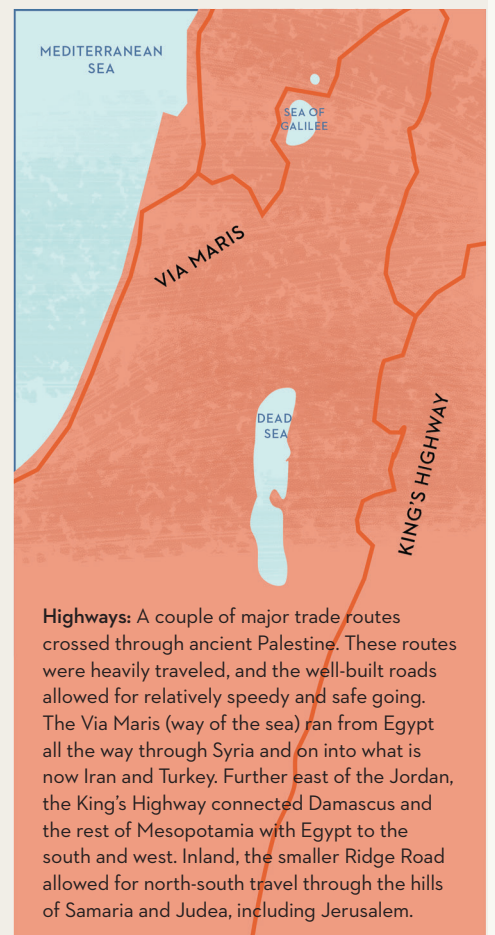
Litters: Among the Romans and wannabe-Romans, a special kind of bed called a **litter** was used to carry imperial dignitaries and very wealthy people. These required two or more slaves to carry them. Litters were most commonly used in cities and towns, and not for long-distance travel.



Donkeys: Donkeys could carry heavy loads, pull plows or carts, and, in a pinch, be ridden by people. They were slower than horses, but sure-footed on steep climbs over the mountains.



Foot Washing: With all this walking, it's no surprise that foot washing was a regular custom in the ancient world. When you welcomed a traveler into your home, washing their feet was both a practical and a hospitable move—especially if they went barefoot or wore gappy, flappy sandals all the time. In houses with servants, this dirty work fell to them. In less well-heeled houses, often the host simply provided water and guests washed their own feet.



Highways: A couple of major trade routes crossed through ancient Palestine. These routes were heavily traveled, and the well-built roads allowed for relatively speedy and safe going. The Via Maris (way of the sea) ran from Egypt all the way through Syria and on into what is now Iran and Turkey. Further east of the Jordan, the King's Highway connected Damascus and the rest of Mesopotamia with Egypt to the south and west. Inland, the smaller Ridge Road allowed for north-south travel through the hills of Samaria and Judea, including Jerusalem.

HOME LIFE

The word house gets used in the Bible to talk about buildings and dwellings—everything from family homes and compounds all the way up to palaces and the Jerusalem temple, which is called the house of God. The word also gets used to describe families, clans,

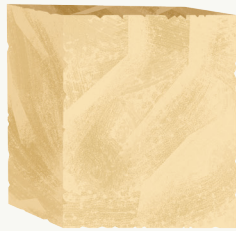
households, and family trees, as in “the house of David.” Most households of regular people included several generations of a family. There needed to be space for everybody, so houses were built to be expanded, or added onto, as the family grew.

Building a House

Small houses were sometimes built into existing caves. The underground room would stay cool in summer and warm in winter.



Stone was the most common building material. Cut stone required a skilled stonemason with iron tools. Poor people piled uncut rocks to make walls.



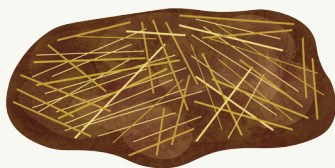
Wooden boards were rare and valuable. The wealthy imported cedar from Syria.



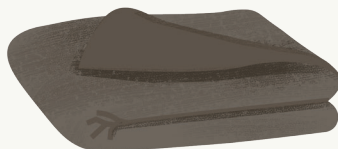
Sticks and poles, tied with rope and stuck together with mud, helped keep out wind and rain.



Where stone was scarce, people made sun-dried bricks from mud and straw. Walls made from these bricks had to be repaired frequently.

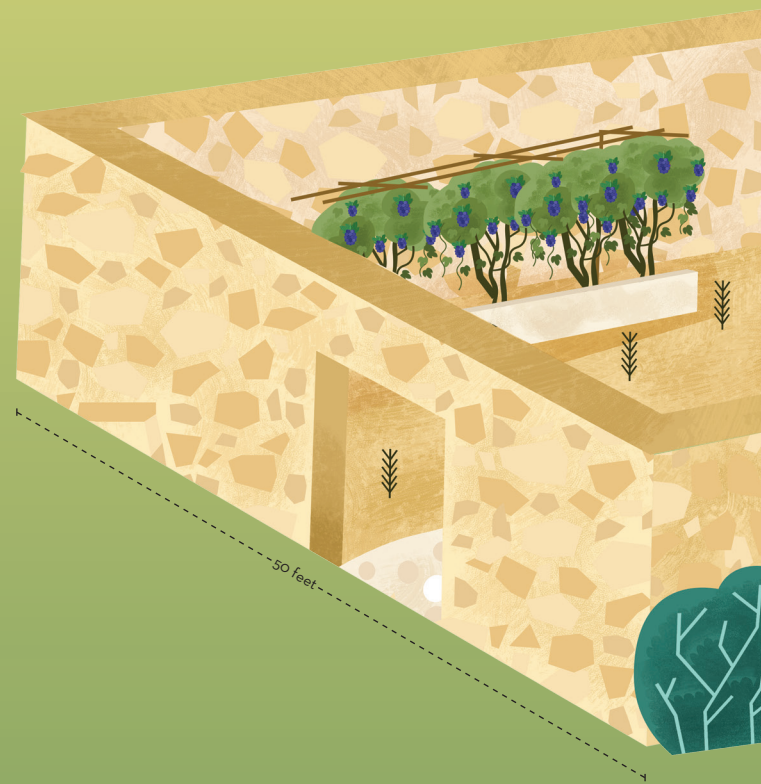


Tarps and blankets made of rough wool were used for canopies and tents, and could divide rooms too. Nomads, called Bedouin, herded sheep and goats. They lived in tents made from their animals' wool and hair.



In the ancient world, people lived together, and there wasn't much privacy in the way we think of it today. Because of the moderate climate, many of life's activities could happen outdoors, on the rooftops or in courtyards.

Poor families with livestock would share part of their house with the animals.



The walls of a house like this were made from a dark, local stone called basalt. Poorer families had smaller houses built of less expensive (and less durable) materials. The very rich had houses with tiled roofs, piped water, under-floor heat, and slaves to do the housework. Only the wealthiest people had indoor kitchens. This is an example of a house owned by a well-to-do fishing family in Galilee.

Unlike this family compound, most homes in the cities and towns of Palestine didn't have private, walled courtyards. Often, neighbors shared common outdoor space. Houses opened onto small squares where people cooked, hung laundry to dry, and visited with each other. These were also spaces to do business and make public announcements.

A lot went on “upstairs.” Most dwellings utilized the roof space for working, cooking and eating, resting or sleeping, or even bathing. On hot days and nights, sometimes a perch on the roof helped you catch a little breeze. Only the houses of the wealthy had indoor stairs.



The Bet Av, or “House of the Father”

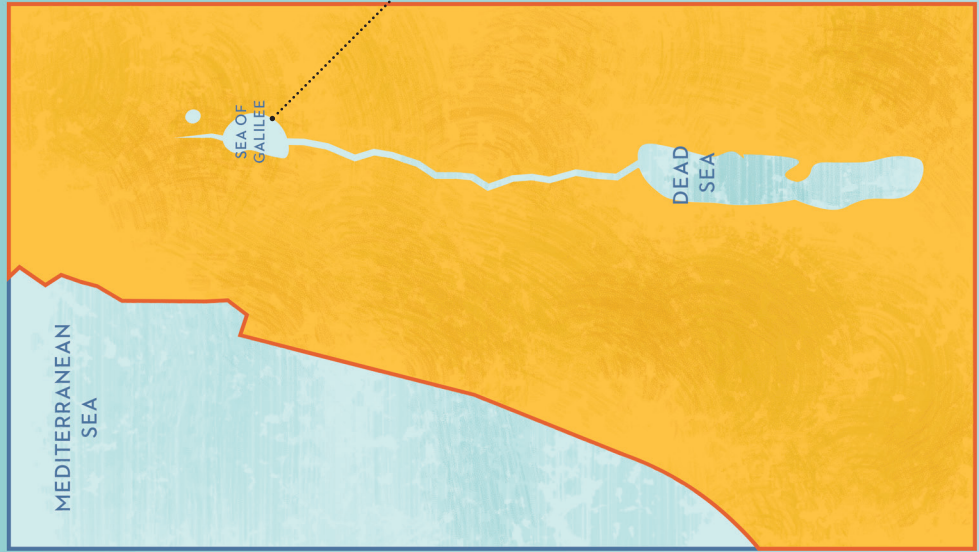
To understand the shape of the society in Jesus’ time, it’s important to understand the way the most basic part of that society worked. In ancient Palestine, the smallest part of society wasn’t the individual person, but the family. First-century families were shaped like pyramids. There was one ruler at the top (in Jesus’ time, this was the father, or **patriarch**). The patriarch was the head of the household. After a son married, he brought his wife into the family home, where they lived with his father and mother. When a daughter was married, she moved into her husband’s household.

Under the patriarch in the family pyramid, other members would have status and responsibility in descending order, all the way down to the youngest child. Wealth and honor went up the pyramid, where the father used it, spent it, or gave it away based on what he thought was best for the family. As patriarch of the family, the father protected the less powerful members, who owed him loyalty and obedience.



FISHING ON THE SEA OF GALILEE

The Sea of Galilee is the largest freshwater lake in this region. The lake gets its water from underground springs and the Jordan River, which starts north of the lake in the Hula Valley. People have likely been catching and eating fish from this body of water for more than ten thousand years! In Jesus' time, one report suggested there were more than two hundred boats actively fishing on the lake.



MEDITERRANEAN SEA

SEA OF GALILEE

DEAD SEA

Also called:

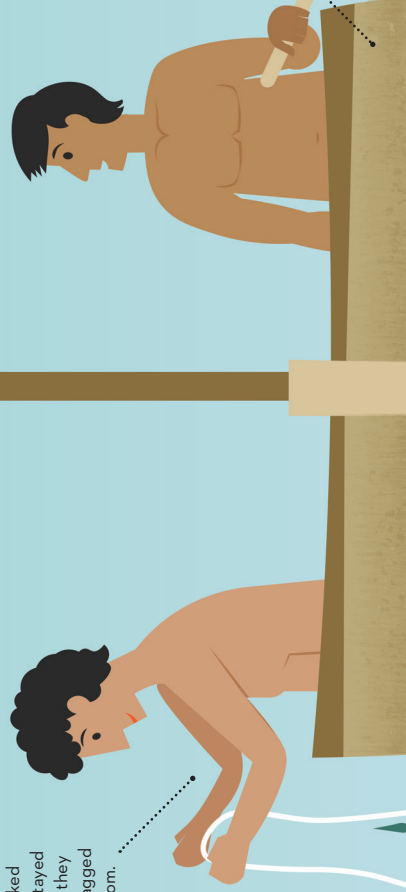
- the Sea of Tiberias
- the Lake of Kinneret
- the Lake of Genessaret

With such simple rigging, fishing boats were hard to sail if the lake got too rough.



Because they had to get in and out of the water a lot, fishermen often worked naked. Fishing boats stayed close to shore, where they threw their nets, or dragged them along the bottom.

Boats were made of wood, and patched with whatever wood was available as they developed cracks and holes. The boats were small and not very stable. Each twenty-five-foot-long boat could hold four or five fishermen.

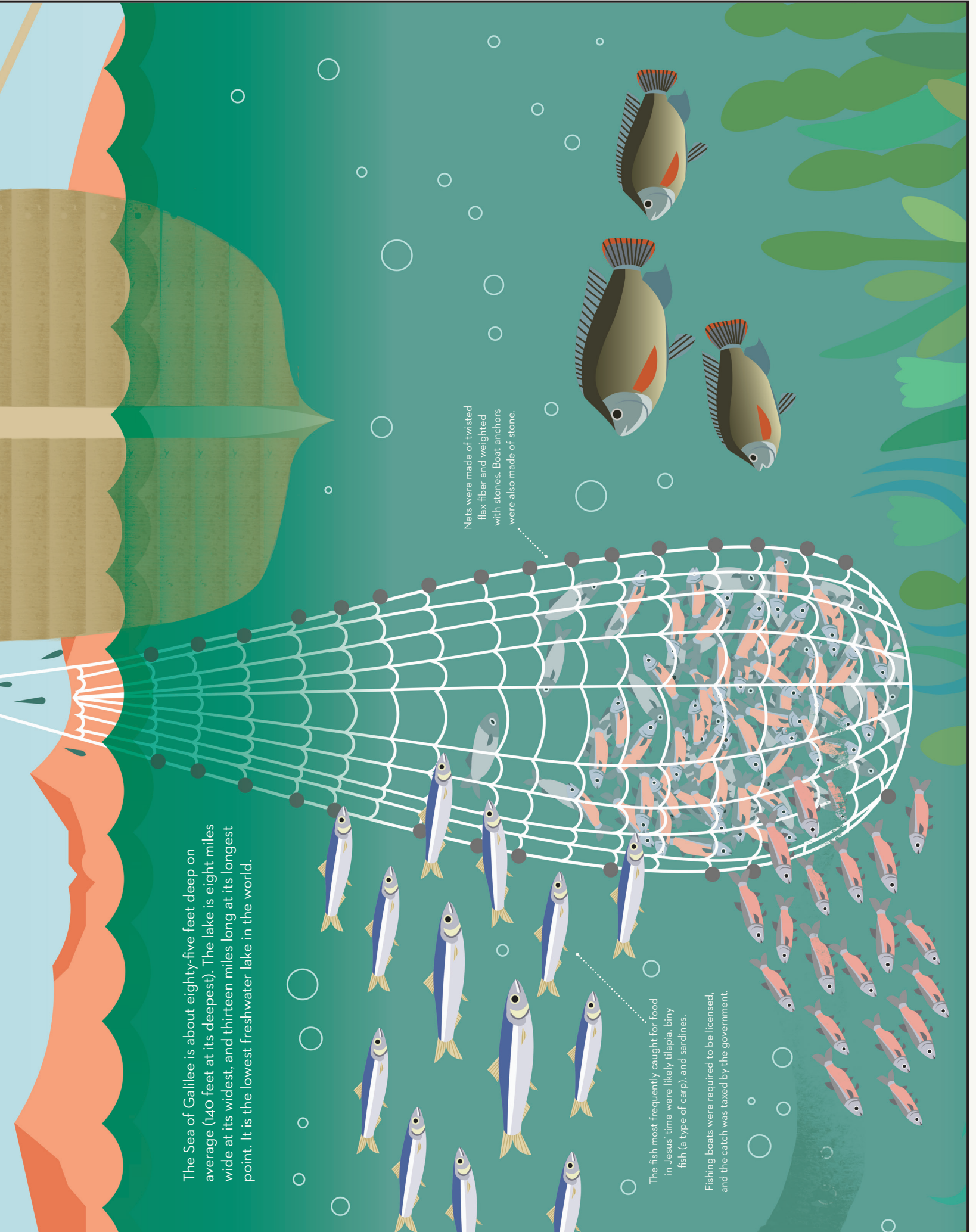


The Sea of Galilee is about eighty-five feet deep on average (140 feet at its deepest). The lake is eight miles wide at its widest, and thirteen miles long at its longest point. It is the lowest freshwater lake in the world.

Nets were made of twisted flax fiber and weighted with stones. Boat anchors were also made of stone.

The fish most frequently caught for food in Jesus' time were likely tilapia, biny fish (a type of carp), and sardines.

Fishing boats were required to be licensed, and the catch was taxed by the government.



THE LIFE OF A WOMAN

Daily life for women in Jesus' time varied a bit depending on where they lived and how wealthy they were. Life in the cities was vastly different from day-to-day living in small villages and farming or fishing communities. But rich or poor, women kept the ancient household running. They were in charge of feeding, clothing, and cleaning up for the family.

Jewish women were also religious leaders at home. The mother of the house said table prayers and led the candle lighting during *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and other festivals. Children were taught to honor father *and* mother.

Religion

At the time, the Jewish religion made several distinctions between women and men:

- Only men could be priests.
- Some parts of the temple were closed to women.
- A menstruating woman was considered impure. Jewish law said that anyone who came into contact with a woman while she was menstruating was also unclean, so women often stayed out of the public eye while they were having their periods.
- Women were also considered impure after giving birth to a baby. This impurity lasted seven days.

Work

Like the men of the time, women most likely knew and worked closely with their neighbors. Women often worked alongside other men and women in agriculture jobs and the marketplace. Roman culture allowed women to conduct their own business, lend money, own slaves, study philosophy, and take jobs as nurses or teachers. It's not clear if rural and poor Jewish women had the same kind of freedom, but it's very likely that women were active beyond their homes and immediate neighborhoods.



A woman who lived to the ripe old age of 50 probably would have given birth to six children. Only two or three of these children would survive to be adults.



Women were often married by the time they were fifteen.



Women who were household slaves often cared for children or did housework. Agricultural slaves worked in fields, fabric dyeing operations, and fish processing areas.

Home Life

In villages and towns, ordinary women shopped for, harvested, prepared, served, and cleaned up all meal-related stuff. And that was a lot of work. To provide food for her family, a woman would need to:

- Grind grain for flour. Make dough. Bake bread.
- Milk animals. Make cheese.
- Tend cooking fires.
- Harvest garden produce.
- Purchase or trade at market for food.
- Serve a breakfast of small amounts of food—sometimes it was yesterday’s leftovers plus today’s bread—that family members took with them to work.
- Prepare the main meal: a stew with some kind of meat or fish, salt, onions, coriander, mint, or dill. Serve bread, cheese, wine, and fruit. Use the bread for dipping.
- Get ready to do it all again tomorrow.

Wealthy people had slaves to do these things. The slaves were usually women.

Economics

The Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures were **patriarchal**, which means “father rule” in Greek. This meant, among other things, that men made the rules, and women were seen as dependent on male strength, intelligence, morality, and control. In this system, daughters were a liability and widows were vulnerable.

But women didn’t always go along with this. There were female business owners, and women who took care of themselves and their families without men. Of course, this was easier for women with money. But poor women without husbands didn’t have many options. That’s why Jesus often spoke about the importance of taking care of widows and orphans. They were some of the most vulnerable people in the culture.

The early Christian movement was known for the way it allowed women to have positions of honor, prominence, and leadership.

Women helped arrange marriages for their children.

Roman and Jewish girls and women were expected to be modest, work hard, and follow the rules of their families and cultures.

