Farming, Village Crafts, Food & Clothing

Teacher Background

The Farmer
Farming was most important. When the former rains (autumn) had softened the ground, furrows were made by a simple wooden plough pulled by an ox. The seed was scattered by hand and the latter rains (spring) brought on the crop. To reap they either pulled out the plants whole or else cut the stalks with a wooden sickle which had sharp flints set into the cutting edge. The corn was carried to a hard level piece of ground known as the threshing-floor, where either the hooves of oxen or an ox-pulled wooden sledge was used to separate the straw from the grain.

During the period of evening breeze the threshed corn was winnowed by tossing it into the air with a pronged fork. The wind blew the light straw away from the floor, where it could be picked up and tied into bundles later for firing domestic ovens. The winnowing was completed by the use of a shovel, by which means the dust was removed too. The pure grain was then measured and bagged for use or sale.

Other major crops were grapes, olives and figs. Most grapes were crushed for their juice in a winepress and the juice fermented in order to keep it. Olives were crushed too, for their oil- a vital commodity for cooking, lighting, cleaning and medicine.

Village Crafts
All kinds of village crafts were practised, even in the early days. The carpenter made and mended farm tools – ploughs and forks and threshing-sleds - and the basic furniture for the home. But there was little wood to use, as trees were not plentiful. The mason quarried out the limestone which constitutes most of the bedrock of Palestine, roughly shaping it for building purposes. The potter used clay to make the utensils for the home, using a wheel (spun by hand at first; and later foot-powered) and a primitive oven. The tanner was also important, but his business was normally outside the village and near running water, because of the smell. Sandals, girdles and goatskin bottles for water were all made here.

Food and Clothing
The peasant family had to work in order to live. The man worked either in the fields or at a village craft, while the women and children worked to keep the home, drawing water from the village well in a goatskin bucket early in the day before it got too hot. Next the corn seeds were sorted to avoid any poisonous ‘tares’ and while some were ‘popped’ on a heated sheet of metal, most were ground at the hand-mill and made into flat cakes before baking in the grass-fired oven. The bread was made to rise by using ‘leaven’, part of a previous day’s dough allowed to ferment.

Clothes were conditioned by the climate. People wore long flowing robes in order to keep cool, but the material and texture was decided by wealth. The peasant wore a loincloth and/or tunic and cloak. The man’s tunic was white and knee-length and to work or run he tucked it up into the girdle round his waist – an action known as ‘girding up the loins’.

The woman’s tunic was similar to the man’s but probably more elaborate and colourful. When its wide sleeves were tied together and slipped up over her neck she was ready for work, arms bare. The outer garment or cloak was a long woollen garment of alternating dark and light brown stripes, slit at the shoulders for the arms.
The wealthy could afford brightly dyed cloth and used a short jacket over the tunic. Often the clothes indicate a man’s profession – the special dress of the priests, for example, or the rabbi’s blue fringed robe. Footwear, when worn at all by the poor man, consisted of a cowhide sole fastened to the ankle by a leather thong passing between the large and second toe; though his richer friend might wear leather slippers. Because the head had to be protected from the sun a turban was worn, or a square of cloth held on to the head by a cord. There were no such luxuries as night attire for the common man. He simply loosened his girdle and wrapped himself in his cloak.