

Economic Conditions during the Life of Yeshua

In this society there were essentially two social groups -- *urban elites and rural peasants*. Between the two there was a huge gulf. Most people in his ancient world produced their own food, clothes, or both and could afford few luxuries. However, Jewish farmers and herdsman earned enough to support their families, pay their taxes, offer sacrifices during one or more annual festivals, and let their land lie fallow in the sabbatical years, when cultivation was prohibited.

Galilee in particular was relatively prosperous, since the land and climate permitted abundant harvests and supported many sheep. There were many landless people and desperate poverty was present, but never reached a socially dangerous level.

The politically and economically dominant urban elites no longer worked the land -- *they owned and controlled much of the land*. They lived on large estates and in grand houses in the cities. Among them were the rich merchants who supplied the Temple with things it needed to operate; for example, timber, incense, fabric and animals to sacrifice. But ultimately, the elites got their wealth from the peasants. They did so through a *'tributary mode of production'* by means of which they extracted wealth from peasants in two ways.

- *The first source of income was **land rental**. The elites over time acquired more and more of the land. Ownership of agricultural land generated income from land rent (paid in cash or kind) and it was the subsistence employment of agricultural workers. This group was subdivided into five classes:*
 - *The first two classes consisted of **the ruler** himself, plus the **governing class** (high officials and traditional aristocracies). Together, they were **1% to 2% percent of the population** and generally **received 50% of the wealth**.*
 - *The third class consisted of **the retainers** who were essentially **a service class to the elites**, in effect, their employees -- soldiers, bureaucrats, scribes, tax collectors, et cetera.*
 - *The fourth and fifth classes were a **merchant class** and (in many societies) a priestly class.*
 - ***The third, fourth and fifth classes** combined comprised were **about 8% of the population** and **they received about 16% of the society's income**.*
 - *The top five classes combined comprised about **10% of the population** and **received about 66% the society's income**.*
- *The second source of income was **taxation**, which was primarily on **agricultural production**. This group consists of four lower classes (**90% of the population** and received 34% of the society's income).*

- *peasants proper (agricultural workers)*
- *artisans (stonecutters, masons, sculptors) and craftsman (metal, wood, cloth dye)*
- *unclean and degraded classes (despised or downgraded occupations)*
- *expendables (outlaws, beggars, etc.)*

Through these two means, wealth flowed from the countryside to the city -- *from rural peasants to urban elites.*

Below is a summary of the classes above. Use it to identify people in the crowds that listened to and questioned Jesus. Watch for references to specific classes in his words, especially in his parables.

1. *rulers (kings and high priests)*
2. *members of the governing class*
3. *retainers (serve the elites) -- soldiers, bureaucrats, scribes, tax collectors, etc.*
4. *merchants and priests*
5. *peasants proper -- agricultural workers*
6. *artisans (stonecutters, masons, sculptors) and craftsman (metal, wood, cloth dye)*
7. *unclean and degraded classes -- despised or downgraded occupations*
8. *expendables -- outlaws, beggars, etc.*

Sources and References:

- *Jesus and Politics in Contemporary Scholarship* by Marcus J Borg -- https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/17824/Borg_Jesus%281995%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- *Jesus* -- <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus-Christ>
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