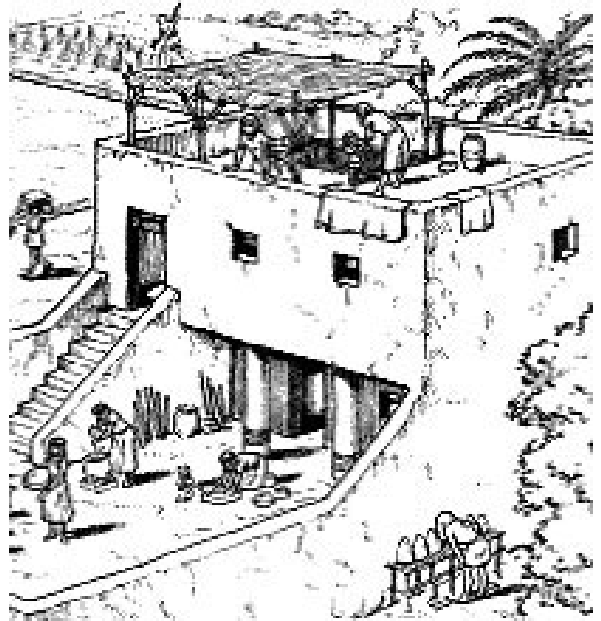


Seasons under heaven

Rabbi David is a really lovely man, but he is so clever that he often forgets about things like eating and drinking. Each week, all the boys in the village go to his house to receive instruction in Torah. Those boys who have had their Bar Mitzvah can choose whether they continue to attend lessons. Jesus and Nathan wanted to continue their studies, so I would often take drinks to the Rabbi, so that he would remember to drink, and allow the boys to do so as well. One hot summers day I struggled up the stairs on the outside of the Rabbi's house carrying a big pot of water and a few pottery beakers. When I got to the top stair and rounded the corner, Rabbi David was quoting from the book of Ecclesiastes. I sat down on the top stair and listened to his mellifluous voice run over the familiar passage of scripture.



(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 -) To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

As he was speaking I gently put down the pot of water and the beakers trying not to break the Rabbi's concentration. As I sat there listening and catching my breath, I looked to see who was listening. Nathan was staring intently at Rabbi David, but Jesus was looking over the parapet of the roof in the direction of the hills, with a far away look in his eyes.

Just as he finished his quotation Rabbi David noticed me, and grimaced. 'Well boys, now would be a good time to have a quick break for a refreshing drink, while you think about that passage, and come up with some questions we could debate. Nathan, take that pot from your mother, and pour some water for me and your friends.'

While Nathan was moving around pouring water and chatting with his friends, I sat down next to Jesus. 'What are you looking at on those hills over there?' Jesus moved his focus to my face, and smiled 'Actually I was thinking about the passage that

Rabbi David was quoting. I have sat here week after week year after year watching people working in the houses and shops around, and out in the fields, but I have never really thought about how everything is set, how everything has a time and a rhythm to it.'

'We are in the vintage season at the moment. Every spare moment now, people are watching their vines, olive trees, figs and whatever other fruit trees they have planted. Many of these trees are older than the people now tending them, and every year they watch over them, prune them, pick from them and process the fruits they produce, so that they last as long as possible. Within a few weeks there will be stacks of grapes, dates and figs drying in the sun ready for use once we have eaten all the fresh fruit. Once all these are harvested, we will celebrate the festival of Succoth. I love Succoth. I love helping to build our hut on the roof of our house. Dad is such a good carpenter that our hut is better than anyone else, at least I think so.'

I smiled at his enthusiasm and said 'Do you remember the year that Marco built one on the roof of his house, and we had a wind in the night and it fell down with him asleep underneath it. Luckily he only got covered in a few small palm branches, and a lot of insects.' Jesus smiled at the memory 'Succoth is a celebration of the last harvests of the year, the ones which end in the month of Tishri which the Romans call September, the seventh month. It isn't the seventh month of their calendar, and it is the first of ours. How weird is that? Well, we always make a really big occasion of it. This year Mum and Dad are going to take me to Jerusalem. We will sleep in a booth we will make there. We will make the traditional switches of a palm branch, a willow branch and a bit of myrtle and we will wave it as we walk to the Temple, to thank Yahweh for all his goodness this past year, and we have had really good harvests so far this year. I have heard Mum and Dad say so. When we have finished thanking Yahweh for the harvest we have just had, we will say the special prayer for the return of the former rains which herald the beginning of the season of planting.'

I smiled at Jesus' enthusiasm for his visit to Jerusalem. 'So the best bit of the year is going to be walking through the streets and going to the Temple?' 'Oh no,' said Jesus, 'what I am really looking forward to is being able to ask the Temple Priests some questions. Sometimes I have ideas about Yahweh which Rabbi David doesn't like, and I want to talk to someone else to see whether I am really wrong about Yahweh.' I smiled, 'Then I look forward to hearing about your answers.'

I leant my head back against the wall of the parapet. 'I think my favourite season is the season of planting. It gets so hot and dry between Shavout, which as you know is in the Roman month of May or in our calendar Sivan, and Rosh Hashanah in September or Tishri, that it is really hard work keeping the vegetables in the garden watered. I have to make several trips a day with water from the well just to keep them alive. It is quite a relief when the dry sirocco winds, which come to us from the desert bringing the dry weather, change, and the cooler west sea winds come and bring with them the first cooling rains of the year. Suddenly the dry cracked soil is moist again,

and the ploughman can set his oxen to till the land and sow the seeds of wheat and barley to give us bread for the coming year. It is a hard and busy season. Everything has to be done quickly while the land is ready. If the rains come late then it can be a real rush to get everything done. If the rains don't come at all, then we will face starvation. I and your mother, along with the other women of Nazareth, have to dig over and prepare our gardens. Then we can plant our seeds so that we will have cucumbers, melons, onions, garlic, leeks, peas and beans. We watch our trees carefully and are relieved when new shoots start to grow on the pomegranate, almond, pistachio and date palm trees.'

'After the First rains, then come the main rains, we hope after Hanukkah in our month of Kislev or what the Romans call December. Our Spring rains come around the time of Purim in the month of Adar which the Romans call February. With all the rain the crops should be swelling and growing.

At this point Nathan, who had finished serving and had helped himself to a drink was sitting on the other side of Jesus listening in to our conversation. He leant over and interrupted. 'My favourite season is harvest. This year Dad says I am big enough and old enough to try to hire myself out to help with the wheat and barley harvests. I want to save up for a knife. Marco has promised that when I have enough money he will find me a knife on his travels. I want something really special.' I smiled at him, 'Well, people are bringing in different harvests for most of the year from the various fruit and nut trees, to the flax, but you will make the most money hiring yourself out for the wheat and barley harvests as they are the biggest crops we grow. The flax harvest starts around Purim in Adar or in the Roman month of February, the barley around Passover in Nisan or March, the wheat is ready for Shavuot.

Jesus looked thoughtful. 'When you say it all out aloud like that it really does bring home to me how much we depend on Yahweh to give us our rains in their right places, then the dry season to ripen the wheat harvest, and the summer heat to ripen and then dry the dates grapes and figs. The combinations of rain and sun in the right proportions means we will have enough to eat, if we work hard to manage the weeds in the crops and there are no invasions of locusts. Every crop has its place in the cycle of seasons, and no crop can happen in another season. Yahweh is so good to us, giving us our food in due season, and giving us such an abundance of food through the year, so that if one crop fails, there should be another to follow.' Rabbi David must have caught the tail end of this conversation for he suggested that Jesus explain to the other boys what he and I had been talking about. Jesus went and sat next to the Rabbi and began to speak to the other boys. I quietly gathered my pot and mugs together again, and slipped my way back down the stairs. To every thing there is a time, and it was time now to put my risen bread in the oven to cook for our evening meal.