

Aviculture in Ancient Israel

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Neat rows of nests in a chalk cave at Beit-Govrin

Isn't this beautiful? This is a photo of the Dovecotes at the ancient city of Beit Guvrin in the Judean lowlands. Part of the Beit-Guvrin – Maresha National Park in Israel, it also features a Roman amphitheater and Tel Mareshah, which was fortified by Solomon's son Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:8). The area is riddled with man-made caves. The workers dug a narrow hole in the hard nari rock layer, which was about 2 meters thick. When they reached the soft inner chalk layer they dug deeper and deeper widening and expanding the cave. These caves were used for burials, storerooms, olive presses, hideouts and dovecotes.

“And when the time came for her purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” —Luke 2:22-24

The Torah required every Jewish mother to make an offering following the birth of a child at the time of her purification — 40 days after for a boy, 80 days for a girl. She could offer either a lamb or the two pigeons mentioned above. So how many pigeons did it take? Here is my admittedly unscientific attempt to arrive at an estimate of the number of pigeons required for those Temple sacrifices. Keep in mind pigeons were also used for other offerings and eaten, so this does not begin to represent the total number of pigeons fledged.

Here are my steps:

A) Estimate the country’s population. Josephus places the number of Jews in Jerusalem at the time of its destruction at 3,000,000. Even though the timing of Titus’s attack trapped a significant portion of the country’s population in the city, this number exceeds the space available. Tacitus places the number at a more reasonable 600,000. If 600,000 people were in Jerusalem, the total population might have been 1,000,000.

B) Estimate the number of children born. Average life expectancy at that time was about 35 years. [Let’s be clear, I’m not suggesting that a person was considered “old” at 35. This average is skewed because one of every two children died before the age of five.] In order to sustain a population of 1,000,000 with an average life expectancy of 35 years you need $1,000,000/35$, or 28,571 new individuals a year. With the high infant mortality rates this means about 60,000 births annually.

C) Calculate pigeons. If 85% of the mothers chose the “poor option,” we need $.85 \times 60,000 \times 2$, or roughly 100,000 pigeons each year for purification sacrifices.

Just as there were families that earned their living raising sacrificial lambs for the Temple, clearly there were people, many people, who raised pigeons for the same purpose, and here’s how they did it.



Ruins of a dovecote in a cave

Here's another, which illustrates how widespread the practice was and what an important part aviculture played in the Jewish economy at that time. The photo above is a dovecote found in the ruins at Modi'in.



Rows of nests in the ruins of Masada

And finally, the one that I find most interesting, a dovecote at the ruins of Masada. We all know that Masada was a mountaintop fortress in the Judean desert built by Herod the Great, and the site of a mass suicide of Zealots led by Eleazar ben Ya'ir when they were trapped by Roman troops. Talk about self-sufficiency. Not only did Herod have huge cisterns, granaries, and storerooms, he and his guests apparently also supped on fresh squab.