# Ancient Israelite Houses

Illustrated Essay by Stephanie Gerig

The Bible is a difficult book to study because it was written so long ago and yet still applies to life today. Some people struggle with this combination and try to read the Bible entirely in today's context. This introduces several problems, especially while considering the Israelite homes. In ancient times, people obviously did not live in houses similar to ours. In fact, they were extremely different.......

The first Israelite dwelling-places were probably caves in the limestone hills of Palestine and Syria.[1]. Lot lived in a cave,[2] but we have no proof that caves were ever commonly used as permanent dwellings. It *is* known that they were often used as places of refuge (Joshua 10:16, Judges 6:2, I Samuel 13:6, 24:3-10, I Kings 19:9,13), storehouses, and tombs(Genesis 23:19). Several caves the Israelites used were natural caves which they enlarged with tools. Some have been discovered with accessories like drain gutters, storage pits, hearths, stone seats, and wall decorations.[3]

Tents were another common home for the ancient Israelite. Genesis 4:20 contains the first Biblical reference of a tent by stating that a man named Jabal was "the father of those who dwell in tents." The Patriarchs are also known to have dwelled in tents, as well as Japheth, who "dwelled in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27).

Israelite tents were, by necessity, extremely portable. The people were not a settled community, but moved around often to find food for their livestock.[4] Tents were a practical housing solution while wandering through Egypt as well (Exodus 12:4,7; Numbers 1:52; 1,13). These tents were often gathered together in a circle, both for defense[5] and to provide a safe place for the livestock during the night.[6]
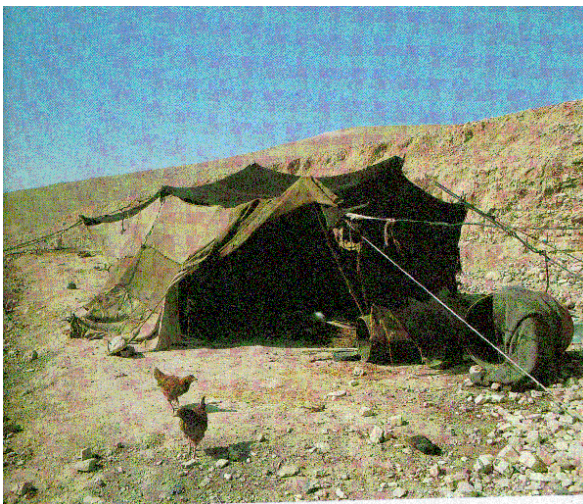
Israelite tents were made of black goat hair, and the word for "tent" in Arabic actually means "house of hair."[7] This material was stretched taut across nine poles and fastened to the ground with pegs.[8] The goat hair, although porous at first, became watertight after the first rain. The sides of the tent were left down in the winter to guard against the cold and lifted in the summer to produce a sunshade and increase airflow.[9] Each tent was generally divided into two sections, with a curtain of goat hair separating the men's and women's quarters.[10] The first room, the men's, was a reception room where visitors would gather, with the second area reserved solely for the women and children. Occassionally, a third room would be set up to house servants or cattle.[11] The average tent was fifteen feet long and ten feet wide with a center height near six or seven feet.[12]

J.A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times.*
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p.56.

Because of the early Israelite's nomadic lifestyle, the furnishings inside the tents were minimal. The floor covering ranged from bare earth to mats of straw or rugs made of camel hair.[13] A circular mat of leather would serve as a table. Also around the tent were a grinding mill, an earthenware lamp, some metal vessels,[14] a leather bucket for gathering water and possibly a few pots and pans. Grain was generally kept near the center post. If the family were fortunate enough to own a camel, the saddle would double for a chair inside the tent. Israelites cooked their meals over a hole in the ground, and there were often firepits both inside and outside the tent.[15]

After the children of Israel conquered the Canaanites, they settled down into the houses of the Canaanites and adopted a more agricultural lifestyle.[16] The use of tents was not totally abandoned, however. In Acts 18:3 we learn that Paul, in the first century A.D., was a tent-maker, which implies that they were still used.[17] Tents were not the exclusive dwelling place for the Israelites, however. Cities existed as early as Genesis 4:17, which says that Cain built a city which he named Enoch. However, houses were not the trend until after the Israelites conquered of Canaan, and then the houses the Israelites built greatly resembled those of the Canaanites and their other neighbors.[18]

This Egyptian soulhouse is similar to the style of the Israelite houses.
William H. Stephens, *The New Testament World in Pictures* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), p. 104.

Israelites did not view their houses as we regard our homes today. Instead of being associated with fond memories and special feelings, the ancient house was regarded simply as a shelter--a place to eat, sleep, and be protected from the weather.[19] These houses were made of whatever materials were available. Many homes were made of sun-dried mud bricks similar to the houses in Mexico and the southwest United States today,[20] and they were also commonly constructed of sandstone set in mud. [21] The extremely wealthy, namely Solomon, had a house made of hewn stone (I Kings 7:9), while still others were made with bricks of clay and straw were covered with a clay plaster. The nature of these walls allowed robbers to "dig through" as mentioned in Job 24:16 and Matthew 6:19. It also provided for the snake which bit Amos (Amos 5:19).

An ancient ruin, showing the nature of the building material.

Ahron Kempinski, Ronny Reich, eds., *The Architecture of Ancient Israel.* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1992), p. 201.

The Bible does not give much information about the houses' actual architecture, but some details have been discovered during archaeological digs. The ancient cities were nothing like they are today. Houses had to conform to available space, so there was rarely any symmetry or systematic planning. [(22)] Often, the city wall would be used as one of the walls for the house, as evidenced in the stories of Rahab (Joshua 2:15) and Saul (Acts 9:25). One-room houses were the standard dwelling for peasants and the common people. The poorest Israelites often lived in simple ten foot-by-ten foot houses, with niches cut out of the walls for storage space.[(23)]
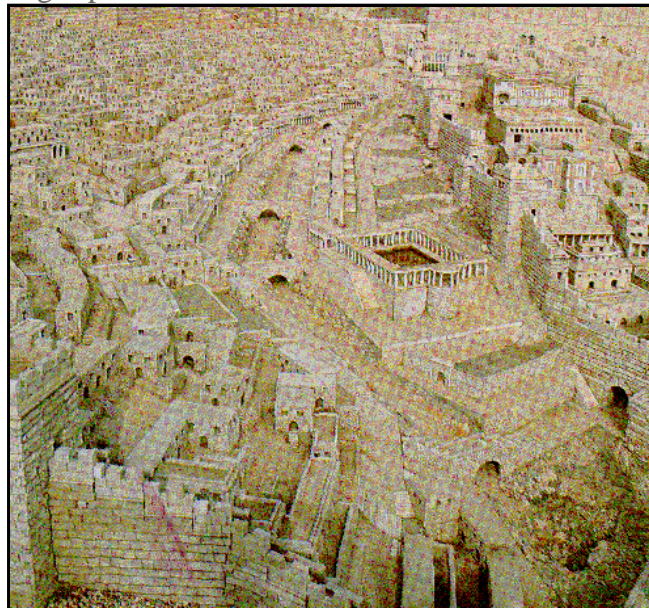

Bird's eye view of a city's design.

J.A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times.*
 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p.55.

A large pillar in the center of the room supported the roof and also contained a small shelf used to

hold a lamp.[24] This lamp was often left burning continually as protection against the thieves who would come in the dark (Proverbs 31:18). Beds in one-room houses ranged from rugs and cushions on the ground to divans, or couches, which were sometimes located along three walls of the room.[25] A simple fire pit would be near the center of the room for heating and cooking purposes. A mat or rug served as a table, and clay vessels and perhaps a few metal cooking utensils would suffice for household needs. Goatskin bottles, which were used for gathering water and storing liquids, were kept inside the house, along with a broom and a handmill for grinding grain.[26]
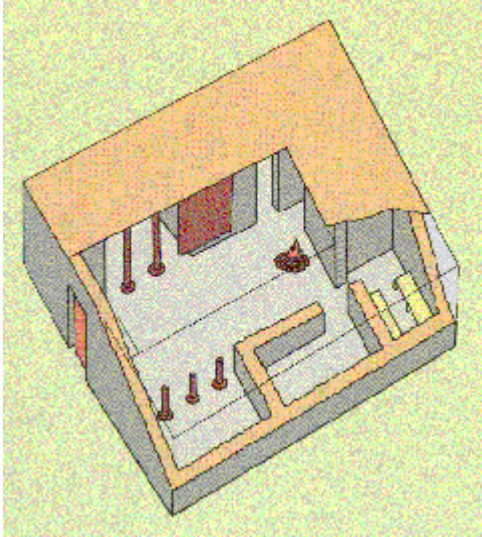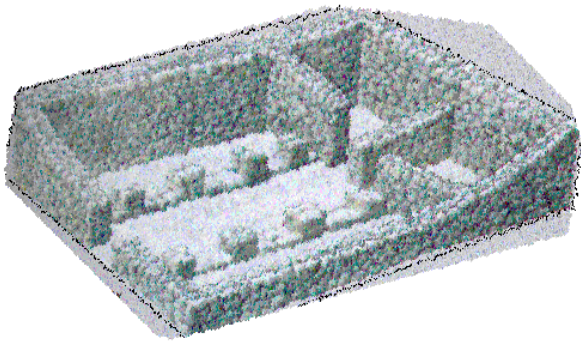
 A simple floorplan.

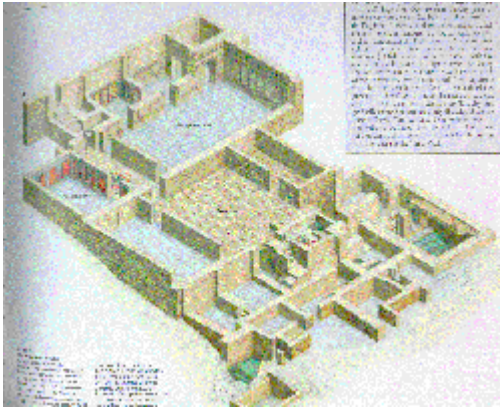J.A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p.60.

The courtyard was an important part of every Israelite house. A wall was built around one-room houses to enclose this area,
 while houses with more than one room were spaced around a central courtyard. A two-room house would be separated by the courtyard, and more rooms were added to the open sides. Buildings that served as home for a large extended family may even have several courtyards and sets of rooms.[27] The rooms all faced the courtyard, rather than the street, which provided the family with privacy. Windows, high and small, were often covered with a lattice.[28] They served as the chimney[29] and faced into the central court.[30] The courtyard was open to the sky, and the owners made it attractive by planting trees, shrubs, and flowers throughout it.[31] The ground was often covered with stones by the common people and marble by the wealthy.[32] Toward the center of the courtyard was occasionally a cistern, which was a sign of prestige. This was a hole in the ground which stored a limited water supply and became a great hiding place when empty. Also in the courtyard was a fireplace, which was either a hallow in the earth or an area paved with stone.

Not only did the courtyard serve as the kitchen and dining room, but it also was a workplace, a winter home for livestock, and a place for entertaining guests.[33] On one end of the courtyard, across from the entryway, was a guest room which would occasionally serve as a banqueting room. This room was generally more open than the other rooms, simply a raised level with a divan around the wall. The furnishings in this room were often a display of the owner's wealth, for it was decorated as elaborately as one could afford.[34]

Examples of central courtyards

Left: James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Harper Atlas of the Bible.* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987), p.65.
Right: James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Harper Atlas of the Bible.* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987), p.169.

Stone Stairs.
J.A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times.*
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p.67.

Possibly even more important than the courtyard, however, was the roof. Stairs to the roof would be found along the wall of the house but *inside* the courtyard. Generally flat and simple, the roof was made by placing large logs across the top of the walls, and putting on top of them smaller logs, at right angles to the first. This was then covered with reeds, clay, and sand or pebbles. The roof was regularly pressed down and made smooth by a stone roller which was stored on the roof.[35] Although the roller helped make the roof compact, it was not completely successful, and the roofs leaked often.[36]

The roof was an integral part of Israelite life, and was used for several purposes including public proclamations, sleeping, gathering in excitement, storage, worship, and escape.[37] It was a place of retreat and also a place for esteemed guests to stay. On the roof was an upper room, which was substituted for by common people with a simple shelter made of palm trees, straw, or reeds.[38] It was in such a room that Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Last Supper (Mark14:15). The roof was surrounded by a low wall, called a parapet, as commanded in Deuteronomy 22:8.

Since the courtyard and entire house were surrounded by a wall, the Israelite house gave the impression that the owners were not welcoming. That is not accurate, for although Israelites valued their solitude, hospitality was extremely important. They saw their house as a sacred, guarded enclosure,[39] but they also felt it was their spiritual duty to entertain guests and to be generous.[40] Doors were left open all day as a sign of hospitality, and a closed door indicated that the family had done something of which it was ashamed.[41]

The ancient Israelite houses are well-suited for their climate and culture. The severe differences between their houses and modern homes provides a fascinating topic of study. A correct understanding of Israelite homes also helps us understand many important Bible passages.

Endnotes

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7. Edwin C. Bissell, *Biblical Antiquities: A Handbook.* (Philadelphia, PA: The American Sunday School Union, 1892), p.16.

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11. Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands.* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1953), p.16.

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14. William S. LaSor, *Daily Life in Bible Times.* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1956), p.4.

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23. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times.* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1987), p.31.

24. G.M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs.* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1888), p. 89.

25. Merrill T. Gilbertson, *The Way it was in Bible Times.* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), p. 17.

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