

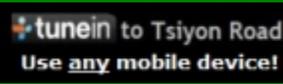
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Tsiyon News

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Cleaning House



YHWH spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “When you have come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I put a spreading plague in a house in the land of your possession, then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, ‘There seems to me to be some sort of plague in the house.’ Lev 14:33-35

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From Eliyahu

People have had some strange ideas down through history so far as cleaning and hygiene are concerned. Here are some strange examples:

~ Ancient Egyptians and Aztecs rubbed urine on their skin to treat cuts and burns.

~ In a small victory for cleanliness, England’s medieval King Henry IV required his knights to bathe at least once in their lives—during their ritual knighthood ceremonies.

~ Excrement dumped out of windows into the streets in 18th-century London contaminated the city’s water supply and forced locals to drink gin instead.

~ In 1843, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. campaigned for basic sanitation in hospitals. But this clashed with social ideas of the time and met with widespread disdain. Charles Meigs, a prominent American obstetrician, retorted, “Doctors are gentlemen, and gentlemen’s hands are clean.”

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~ Up to a quarter of all women giving birth in European and American hospitals in the 17th through 19th centuries died of puerperal fever, an infection spread by unhygienic nurses and doctors.

~ It is now believed President James Garfield died not from the bullet fired by Charles Guiteau but because the medical team treated the president with manure-stained hands, causing a severe infection that killed him three months later.

Cleaning and hygiene problems continue even today, as these strange facts reveal:

~ Monks of the Jain Dharma (a minority religion in India) are forbidden to bathe any part of their bodies besides the hands and feet, believing the act of bathing might jeopardize the lives of millions of microorganisms.

~ A seventh grader in Florida recently won her school science fair by proving there are more bacteria in ice machines at fast-food restaurants than in toilet bowl water.

~ Patient safety has declined .. because of a rise in health care associated infections (HAI), infections that patients acquire during the course of their stay in a healthcare setting, such as a nursing home or a hospital. HAIs are among the top ten leading causes of death in the United States, and drive up the cost of health care by up to \$20 billion per year.

All of this reminds us that being clean can be a life and death matter. As our Midrash Of Leviticus 14 this week shows us, ancient Israel was thousands of years ahead of their time regarding matters of cleanness, due to the Divine wisdom given to them in the Torah. Further, this wisdom applies on every level physically and spiritually, and could literally save the life of every person in every family today. Come and join us for this vital teaching.

Blessings and Shalom!

Eliyahu ben David

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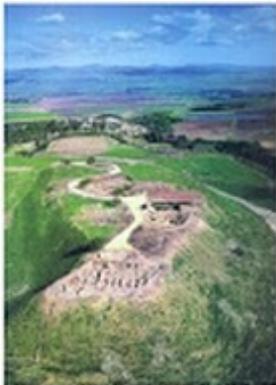
PS - Below I've reprinted a fascinating article about the ancient Israelite house. While I don't agree with the authors on every point I think they amply prove their main point, that Israelite houses reflect the Torah life-style of the occupants.

TSIYON NEWS

Happy Website Problems - Lately we've had reports of website visitors being unable to access our websites. This turns out to be a happy problem, because of the reason this has been happening. Since we've upgraded our radio player on our website to play on page-load we've been getting so many people listening directly from the site that it has been maxing out our server, blocking additional visitors from accessing both tsiyon.org and tsiyon.net. We apologize for the inconvenience. Not to worry though, you should be able to get on the sites just fine now, because we've upgraded our capacity.

The Four Room House—The Israelite House

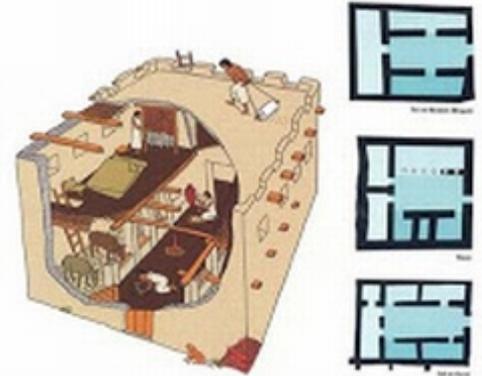
It is the predominant type of domestic building in Iron Age Israel (1200–586 B.C.E.). It dominated the architecture of Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E.) and completely disappeared after the Babylonian destruction of 586 B.C.E., which ended the monarchy and started the Babylonian Exile



The Israelites' ideology of purity and order helps make sense of the astonishing dominance of the four-room plan at almost all levels of Israelite architectural design. To the Israelites, this conformity of design communicated unity and order and negated separateness and chaos. These strongly-held concepts must have percolated through all spheres of daily life, including material culture. We can imagine that once the four-room house took shape and was formalized as the container and embodiment of the Israelite lifestyle and symbolic order, it became the "right" house type—hence its great popularity. Building according to other architectural schemes must have been considered a deviation from the norm and possibly a violation of the holy order.

For these reasons, the four-room house became *the* Israelite house. The two are synonymous. At the dawn of the Iron Age, the embryonic versions of the four-room house and its more humble subtypes were options among a variety of house plans. The limited popularity of the house at this stage barely hinted at its eventual universality. Function may have played a role in the evolution of the layout, but one should not forget that for many generations Canaanite peasants seem to have managed quite well with other types of dwellings.

In Iron Age I, hundreds of small villages were established in the highlands of ancient Canaan (on both sides of the Jordan River). Among them are Khirbet Raddana, Ai, Giloh, Shiloh, Izbet Sartah, Mt. Ebal and many others. These sites were identified as the settlement of the Israelite tribes in the region. The sites are small—usually less than three acres (1 hectare)—and have a very rudimentary material culture. These sites are unfortified, and many of the buildings belong to the archetype of what later became known as the four-room house, the typical house of Israelite architecture. No public buildings have been unearthed in these villages.



Ideology in Stone

Understanding the four-room house

By Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust

During the late 1920s, an expedition by the Pacific School of Religion discovered three houses of strikingly similar design at Tell en-Nasbeh, Biblical Mizpah. When the first of these was unearthed in 1927, excavators thought it was a temple, and Professor William F. Badè, the excavation director, held a church service in its ruins. Today, hundreds of these buildings have been found, and are now referred to by a generic name, the four-room house. Sometimes they are also called the "Israelite house," and whether that is an acceptable designation is among the questions we will consider.

The four-room house has three parallel long rooms separated by two walls or rows of columns, plus a broad room across one end. Subsidiary rooms may be added and rooms may be subdivided, but the basic plan is always the same. Some scholars think that one of the long rooms, usually the center one, was unroofed, creating a kind of courtyard. Most of these buildings also seem to have had a second story, although only sparse evidence of this has survived.

This kind of house is found throughout the country. It is the predominant type of domestic building in Iron Age Israel (1200–586 B.C.E.). It first appeared in about 1200 B.C.E.—just as the Israelites were beginning to coalesce as a people in Canaan—and reached its mature form toward the end of Iron Age I (sometime before 1000 B.C.E.), roughly when the processes that led to the establishment of the Israelite monarchy were beginning. It dominated the architecture of Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.E.) and completely disappeared after the Babylonian destruction of 586 B.C.E., which ended the monarchy and started the Babylonian Exile.

Some scholars have suggested that the four-room house evolved from the earlier nomad's tent, while others seek its roots in Late Bronze Age Canaanite architecture, especially in the region of the Shephelah. Most often, however, the popularity of the four-room house has been explained in terms of its close association with the Israelites as a people. The idea of the four-room house as the Israelite house was expressed by the late Yigal

Shiloh, of Hebrew University: “In the light of the connection between the distribution of this type and the borders of Israelite settlement, and in the light of its period of use and architectural characteristics, it would seem that the four-room house is an original Israelite concept.”

But neither Shiloh nor any other early proponent of the association between the four-room house and the Israelites suggested a satisfactory answer to the basic question: Why was this type of building so popular among the Israelites? Only recently has an answer been offered—an explanation that stresses the house’s function. In the view of Harvard’s Lawrence Stager, “The pillared [four-room] house takes its form not from some desert nostalgia monumentalized in stone and mudbrick, but from a living tradition. It was first and foremost a successful adaptation to farm life: the ground floor had space allocated for food processing, small craft production, stabling, and storage; the second floor was suitable for dining, sleeping, and other activities ... Its longevity attests to its continuing suitability not only to the environment ... but also for the socio-economic unit housed in it—for the most part, rural families who farmed and raised livestock.” John S. Holladay of the University of Toronto echoes Stager: “From the time of its emergence in force until its demise at the end of Iron Age II, the economic function of the ‘Israelite [Four-Room] House’ seems to have been centered upon requirements for storage and stabling, functions for which it was ideally suited ... Furthermore, its durability as preferred house type, lasting over 600 years throughout all the diverse environmental regions of Israel and Judah, even stretching down into the wilderness settlements in the central Negev, testifies that it was an extremely successful design for the common—probably landowning—peasant.”

While this functional explanation seems compelling, however, it fails to convey the full story of the four-room house as a cultural phenomenon.

More than 30 years ago, Shiloh himself noticed that the four-room plan appears in a wide variety of Iron Age II buildings—from common private dwellings to monumental buildings such as the citadel at Hazor in the north or the Negev forts. He reasonably concluded that “The four-room plan was thus used as a standard plan for buildings of very different function within the Israelite city.” Today we can expand Shiloh’s conclusion to include many more examples, from isolated farms and hamlets to main urban centers. Even though all these buildings haven’t been fully analyzed, it is clear from their contents that they served a great variety of functions—as residences for single soldiers, as dwellings for nuclear and extended families, as administrative buildings and so on. All these diverse functions were served by the same basic architectural plan—a plan that was used even in tombs. This “astonishing rigidity in concept,” as Volkmar Fritz aptly phrases it, also had astonishing durability—it lasted almost 600 years.

Is there more to the popularity and durability of the four-room house design than its functionality? And if the *raison d’être* of this structure lies only in its functional suitability for peasant life, why did the peasants in ancient Israel not continue to use it following the Babylonian destruction and exile, through the Persian period and thereafter? And why did they use it for other than domestic purposes before the Babylonian exile?

We believe that the four-room house was a symbolic expression of the Israelite mind—that is, their ethos or world-view. At the same time, this style of domestic architecture in turn helped to structure that mind.

Our approach to the four-room house issue concurs with the idea of a “new Biblical Archaeology” promoted recently by William G. Dever. He calls for a renewed, balanced dialogue between archaeologists of the Biblical period and the Biblical texts that provide an indispensable “window” into the thought-world of ancient Israel. According to Dever: “an explanation of what really took place in ancient Israel in the Iron Age must look not only at the material remains of that culture, but also at those ideals, spiritual and secular ... that motivated those who were the bearers of that culture.” In light of current theoretical development in archaeology, it is obvious that an explanation of “what happened in history” cannot be reduced merely to adaptation—to materialist or determinist schemes that only take into account factors like environment, technology and subsistence and ignore the role of symbols, ideology and even religion in the shaping of society and in culture change.

At the start, we may dispel the argument made by some scholars that the four-room house is not really an Israelite house due to the fact that examples can be found outside Israelite territory. Most of the examples often cited, such as ‘Afula, Tel Qiri and Tell Keisan in the northern valleys of Israel, are not really four-room houses; while they may have four rooms, their configuration is completely different—comprising broad rooms and front courts or a mixture of rooms and courts. In other cases (for example, Sahab in Transjordan) there seems to be some confusion between four-room houses and pillared buildings. True four-room houses found outside Israelite territory mainly date to the early Iron Age. And some of these houses may actually have been located within a temporarily expanded Israelite territory. The remaining examples outside ancient Israel are very few indeed, and may be explained as representing ephemeral use by non-Israelites or by Israelites living in non-Israelite regions. Both temporally and geographically, the four-room house may safely be called the Israelite house.

The first scholar to suggest that the four-room house might be explained as a symbolic expression of the uniquely Israelite mentality and worldview was Moshe Weinfeld of Hebrew University. More than a decade ago, Weinfeld insightfully suggested that the house plan might have facilitated the separation between ritual purity and impurity—such as men’s avoidance of women during menstruation—that was so important to the Israelite way of life. Indeed, on examining the four-room plan one can immediately recognize its greatest merit, which is maximum privacy: Once you entered the central space of the building (whether an open or roofed courtyard), you could enter any room directly without passing through adjacent rooms. Other dwelling structures in ancient Israel during the Bronze and Iron Ages seem to lack this special quality.

In the last couple of decades, cultural anthropologists have written about what they call “the social logic of space.” The way people organize the spaces they inhabit reveals such matters as social hierarchies and cultural codes. Building layouts can be analyzed and compared for their “space syntax”: How, for example, does a particular building plan affect the way a visitor or inhabitant may have access to its different rooms? Which rooms must be passed through first? What parts of the house are most out of reach? The social meaning of space syntax derives from the possible contact of a building’s inhabitants with strangers as well as each other. Different space syntaxes, therefore, hint at different systems of social and cultural relations.

For example, if matters of purity were crucial in the conduct of Israelite daily life, then the unique plan of the four-room house facilitated it. Many societies segregate or restrict the movement of women who are menstruating; unlike the laws of other ancient Near Eastern societies, most of the Biblical purity injunctions do not require menstruating women to leave the house, but given other restrictions imposed on them, it is reasonable to assume that if some of these rules were kept, Israelite women spent some of their time separate from the house's other inhabitants. The plan of the four-room house seems eminently suited to such a practice: Because each room could be entered directly from the central space without passing through other rooms, purity could be strictly maintained even if a ritually impure person resided in the dwelling.

Examples like this hint at a possible connection between the four-room layout and specific cultural behavior (like men avoiding menstruating women). The layout may have been developed to accommodate that specific behavior.

The four-room house also expresses the “democratic” or egalitarian ethos of Israelite society. In this respect, the space syntax of the four-room house is conspicuously different from that of other contemporaneous house types, such as the houses at Tell Keisan, Tel Qiri and Tel Hadar in northern Israel as well as Bronze Age houses. The latter have a more linear form—a visitor must pass through each room in sequence—which expresses hierarchy and restricts access or movement within the dwelling. The four-room house does the opposite: Its shallow, “tree-like” shape allows easy and direct access to each room from the central courtyard.

A recent study has demonstrated that large households with more families have a more complex and hierarchically structured arrangement of living and sleeping spaces, reflecting their complex social structure. People of lower status—whether because of age or gender or marital status—are more accessible in terms of the structural “depth” of space within the house than are those of higher status. For instance, in these houses, special living or sleeping areas are frequently set aside for married children as opposed to unmarried children; this is in contrast to the ad hoc sleeping arrangements or shared sleeping spaces often seen in societies with simpler, more egalitarian dwellings. We would expect to see some degree of hierarchical structuring of the domestic space in Israelite houses: In rural and elite, well-to-do four-room houses, rooms are often subdivided, enabling them to be divided hierarchically. But the potential for that is limited because of the inherent simplicity of the layout—the house, again, lacks depth.

The four-room house was really a kind of symbol—communicating the Israelites’ value system nonverbally to both its occupants and to the surrounding community. The house’s internal structure communicated to its residents the mutually-held concepts of a common cultural system, by creating an environment that reinforces existing social divisions based on gender, generation and rank, which are linked to cosmological schemes—that is, the people’s view of how the world is ordered. Just by living in the house, occupants are constantly reminded of these values and principles, which are thus inculcated in each new generation.

The house also conveyed a message to the outside community about the economic and social status of the household, sending signals about matters of social difference like affluence and taste. At the same time, it also seems to bear a message essential in supporting the ideals of Israelite society as a whole. Building a house according to the traditional code of a society communicates the important message that “we’re part of the community,” thereby enhancing the cohesion of that community.

But how do we explain why the four-room house is so ubiquitous, even in nonresidential buildings? No matter how persuasive, the functional argument falls far short of explaining why this layout was applied not only to family dwellings but also to public buildings.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas has developed the idea that many of the Biblical laws are actually about order. Only in wholeness and completeness may holiness reside. Many of these laws, covering all aspects of life—from war to sexual behavior and from social conduct to dietary rules—are based on precepts that are rooted in that basic principle. All of these precepts embrace the idea that holiness comes from order and sin from chaos. Holiness requires completeness in a social context—an important enterprise, once begun, must not be left incomplete. To be holy, individuals must conform to the category to which they belong, and different categories of things must not be mixed together. To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, purity, perfection of the individual and of the kind. Hybrids and other mixtures are abominations. For example, garments of mixed wool and flax are forbidden and an ass may not be yoked with an ox (Deuteronomy 22:10–11).

The Israelites’ ideology of purity and order helps make sense of the astonishing dominance of the four-room plan at almost all levels of Israelite architectural design. To the Israelites, this conformity of design communicated unity and order and negated separateness and chaos. These strongly-held concepts must have percolated through all spheres of daily life, including material culture. We can imagine that once the four-room house took shape and was formalized as the container and embodiment of the Israelite lifestyle and symbolic order, it became the “right” house type—hence its great popularity. Building according to other architectural schemes must have been considered a deviation from the norm and possibly a violation of the holy order.

For these reasons, the four-room house became the Israelite house. The two are synonymous. At the dawn of the Iron Age, the embryonic versions of the four-room house and its more humble subtypes were options among a variety of house plans. The limited popularity of the house at this stage barely hinted at its eventual universality. Function may have played a role in the evolution of the layout, but one should not forget that for many generations Canaanite peasants seem to have managed quite well with other types of dwellings. In any event, during the later part of Iron Age I, the well-known form of the house crystallized and became dominant, mainly in the central hill country where archaeology and the Bible tell us that early Israelites settled. The few examples of the four-room house outside this region did not outlast Iron Age I.

At this point, the house began to reflect Israelite cultural behavior—their ethos, their need for privacy, the seclusion of the ritually impure and so on—and perhaps even became an ethnic marker—that is, a distinctive feature of the Israelites as an ethnic group unto themselves.

Material culture should not be equated too directly with ethnicity, but when ethnic groups express their identity as different from other groups, they may deliberately use certain distinctive aspects of their material culture to communicate that difference. This can be done in several ways. People could adopt certain traits that identify them as belonging to group X and not Y (in many cases a certain item of clothing is used). These symbols, however, are arbitrary (that is, ethnic distinctions can make use of any material item), and are, therefore, sometimes hard to identify archaeologically. Another way ethnicity is reflected in the archaeological record is through “ethnically specific behavior.” We have seen how, internally, the four-room house successfully expressed and reinforced Israelite values and way of life, as demonstrated by its growing popularity. And because of the importance of order and unity to the Israelites’ perception of holiness, the four-room layout soon became the dominant building plan throughout Israelite territory, and stayed that way for more than half a millennium. Whether it was deliberately chosen at the end of Iron Age I as an ethnic marker or only gradually, unconsciously took on this role (that is, as a result of “ethnically specific behavior”) we cannot say. Yet evidently, during the later part of Iron Age I and throughout Iron Age II, the four-room plan must be considered as predominantly Israelite, although others may have sporadically used this type of dwelling.

The Assyrian invasion of the late eighth century B.C.E. ended the northern kingdom of Israel. The Babylonian invasion of the early sixth century B.C.E. ended the southern kingdom of Judah. Thus was ended also the omnipresent ethnic symbol that was the four-room house. It exited the historical stage, leaving us with only hints of its symbolic meaning for ancient Israelite society.

Reference for this article:

Bunimovitz, Shlomo, Faust, Avraham. “Ideology in Stone.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jul/Aug 2002, 32-41, 59-60. <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=28&Issue=4&ArticleID=3> (accessed 11/29/2009) http://mordechaitokarsky.blogspot.com/2009_11_01_archive.html

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