

HOUSE CONSTRUCTION IN THE FIRST CENTURY

WHILE WE MIGHT THINK OF MOST OF JESUS' ministry taking place in large public settings, a surprising number of events in Jesus' life and ministry took place in people's homes—



BY STEVE LEMKE

the healing of the paralytic man lowered through the roof, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus' supper with the tax collectors at Matthew's house, the healing of Jairus's daughter, His own home in Capernaum, explaining His parables and teachings to His disciples, a place to try to retreat from large crowds, having women anoint His feet, healing of the man at the Pharisee's house on a Sabbath day, ministering to Zacchaeus in Jericho, instituting the Lord's Supper, experiencing His trial at Caiaphas's house, and one of His post-resurrection appearances. Jesus ministered to many people in the setting most comfortable for them—their own homes.

Jesus often used analogies drawn from everyday life in His teaching ministry, and referred to houses frequently in His teachings—the lampstand lighting the house; building a house upon a good foundation; the instability of a house divided against itself; analogies about robbing a house; the cornerstone the builders rejected; an unclean spirit going back into a person like into a cleaned house; the person on the housetop of his own house; the wedding feast banquet at the house; and the woman sweeping her house to find a lost coin.

Houses also figured prominently in the ministry of the early church in the Book of Acts. The reception of the Holy Spirit by

Left: Ruins of the village of Yehudiya, in the Golan Heights, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The original inhabitants, mostly Jews, surrendered to the Romans during the first Jewish revolt (A.D. 66-73). The village grew through the Byzantine

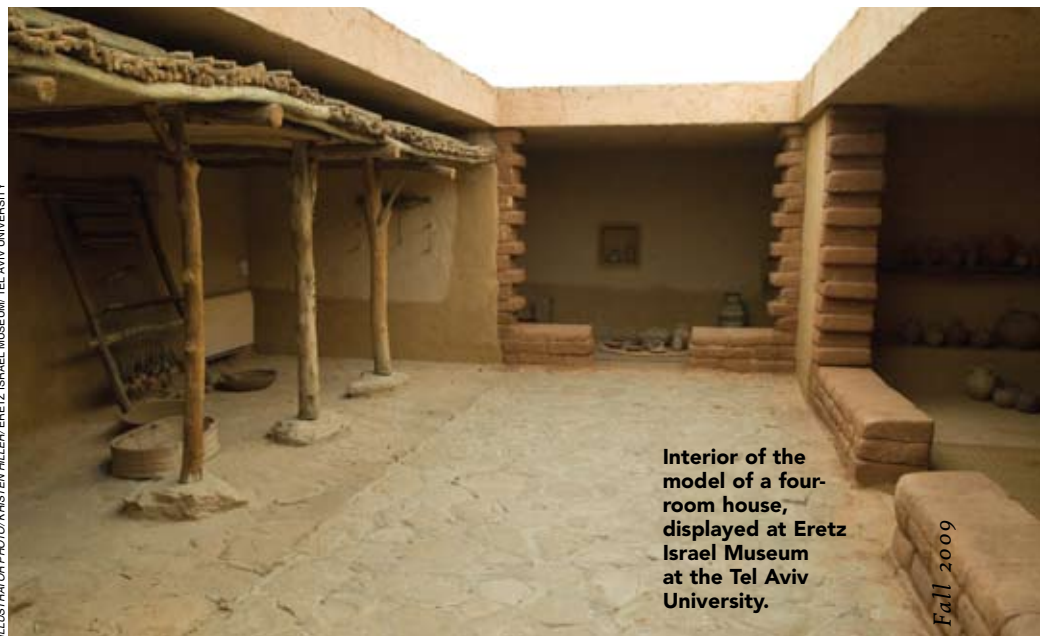
Era but was later abandoned. The ruins that are seen today were built during the Ottoman period, with the new structures being constructed on the ancient ruins. Thus these ruins give a pretty accurate picture of the layout of a first-century village in the Galilee region.

the church at Pentecost began in the upper room of a house, and the early church witnessed about Christ by going from house to house. In his home in Damascus, Ananias disciplined Paul; in a home Peter saw his vision on Simon the tanner's roof and subsequently witnessed at Cornelius's house; and in a home the church held a prayer meeting, which was interrupted by Peter's miraculous release from prison. Paul ministered out of homes during his missionary journeys: Lydia's house in Philippi, the Philippian jailer's house, Jason's house in Thessalonica, the home of Titius Justus in Corinth, the house of Philip the evangelist in Caesarea, and his own house in Rome for two years.

What do we know about the design of houses in the first-century that helps us to understand these events and teachings more clearly? Except for some minor variations, house construction in the region of Israel remained remarkably consistent over the centuries. Houses in Judea and Galilee in the time of the New Testament were generally not as ornate and architecturally

advanced as some houses in the Greco-Roman world. Some homes were partially built out of caves, but most homes were stand-alone structures. In urban areas the rear walls of homes sometimes doubled as part of the city's outer walls. Most city streets were crooked, weaving according to the topography of the land. The streets were often extremely narrow, such that one could stretch his arms and touch houses on either side of the street. The houses in the Upper City of Jerusalem were built closely together.¹

One important key for constructing a house in the climate of the Middle East was to build on a sound foundation of solid rock. Houses were normally built in the summer, which is the dry season. The unwise builder might survey a possible location on hardened clay and assume that this would be an excellent place to erect a house. When the rainy season returned in the winter, however, the hard clay would take on "the consistency of chocolate pudding,"² and the walls of the house would begin to buckle. The wise



Interior of the model of a four-room house, displayed at Eretz Israel Museum at the Tel Aviv University.

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: Mark 2:1-3:12

builder, however, would do the laborious, exhausting work of digging through the hardened clay until he reached bedrock. Only a house built on a foundation of solid bedrock would withstand the storms of the rainy season (Isa. 28:14-16; Matt. 7:24-27).³

The houses of poorest persons generally had a single large area divided into space for the humans and space for the animals. The layout of most houses in ancient Canaan normally took the shape of a cube, consisting of one to four rooms with a central courtyard, which served as an entryway. The four-room house design was so popular that it has become known as the "Israelite house." Shaped like a capital "E," its layout had one long room horizontal to the street in the back of the house and three parallel rooms vertical to the street in the front. Sometimes the back wall of the back room doubled as part of the city wall. Of the three parallel rooms, the one in the center often served as a courtyard between the two side rooms. The dimensions of these four-room houses were usually about 25-30 feet long and 35-50 feet deep, ranging from about 850 square feet to about 1,500 square feet in size. Archaeologists have discovered one larger house in Jerusalem that covered over 1,800 square feet.⁴

Many family activities took place in the front courtyard. Here people typically cooked in clay ovens. Cisterns to hold water were often located in these courtyards, fed by gutters from the rooftop to help collect rainwater. The courtyards were often placed on the eastern side of the house to take advantage of the prevailing westerly winds to blow the smoke away. The courtyards were also used for storage and to shelter animals.⁵

The type of materials builders used for the outer walls of houses depended upon the location. Houses in the lowlands of the Jordan Valley were constructed of mud brick, because stone was not available. In the hill country, the houses were made from fieldstones. The fieldstones varied in size from small to large boulders. Sometimes the exterior of the walls was plastered with a mixture of lime and sand to protect the walls from the elements. The exterior walls were about three feet thick on three sides and seven to eight feet thick on the side which backed the city wall. The walls on the second floor were made of adobe-like clay or hardened clay bricks. These large mud bricks were approximately 20 by 16 by 6 inches in size. Whitewash

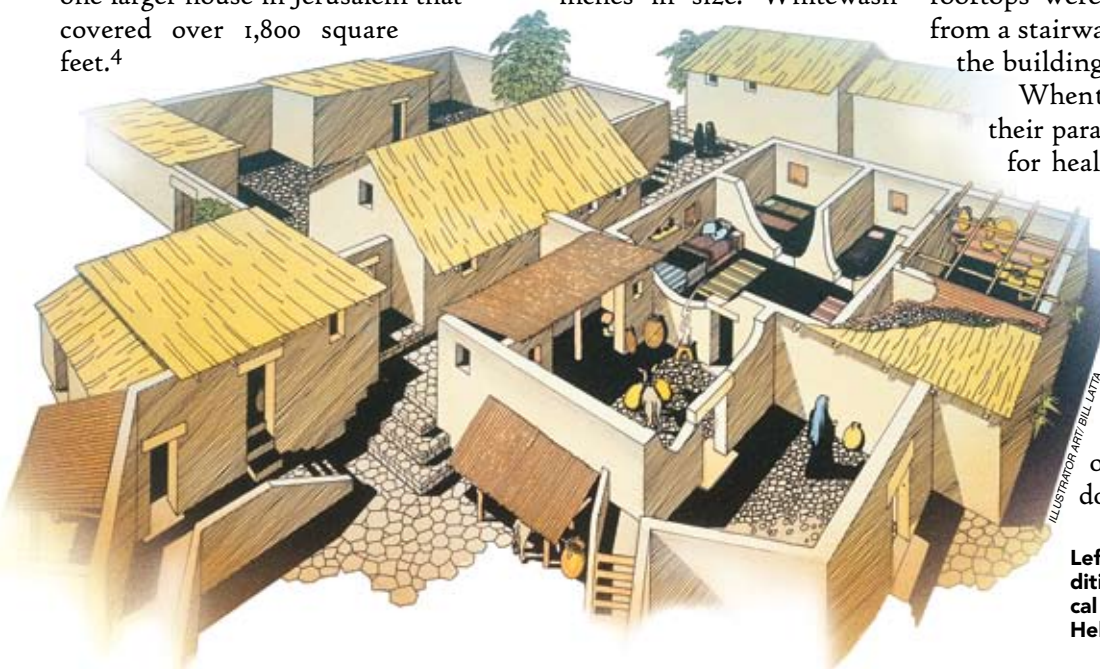
helped brighten the dull color of these small houses.⁶

To provide better shelter from the weather and burglars, the walls seldom had windows.⁷ These clay houses were already susceptible to robbery by thieves who dug through the clay to break into the houses (Matt. 6:19-20; 24:43). One Greek word for "burglar" literally means "mud digger," because the primary means of robbery was to dig quickly through the mud-based walls.⁸ The wealthier people constructed their houses with limestone taken from nearby quarries.

The floors in the poorest homes were simply made of beaten dirt. Some modestly-wealthy people had flooring of pebbles, flat flagstones, or baked clay tiles, sometimes designed in a mosaic pattern. The homes of the rich had luxurious floors made of cedar or cypress wood, and other decorative effects such as wall paintings or mosaics.⁹

The ceilings or roofs of most houses were made of beams or planks, with a mixture of clay and straw material filled in between them. These thatched roofs could be composed of hardened clay, ceramic clay tiles, or a mixture of sand and mortar. The rooftops were usually accessible from a stairway on the outside of the building.¹⁰

When the four men brought their paralytic friend to Jesus for healing, they could not get through the crowd. So they evidently lifted him in his cot up the stairway to the roof, and broke through the ceramic clay tiles on the roof to let him down to where Jesus



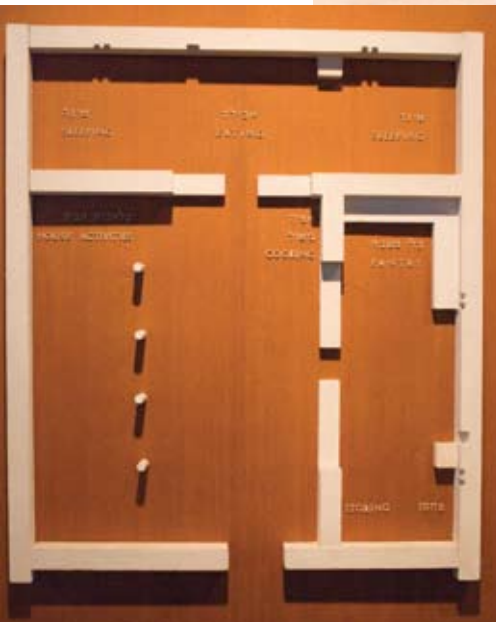
Left: Artist's rendition of a typical first-century Hebrew home.

Right: Sleeping and eating area displayed in the four-room house model, Tel Aviv University.

Below: Floor plan of a four-room house, typical from 8th cent. B.C. Persons entered into a central courtyard. Rooms were on three sides of the house.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER/ ERETZ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY



or for doing daily chores such as drying clothes. Some homeowners even built a small “upper room” as an additional story for the house that could be used as a guest room or a meeting room. Although these roofs were fairly flat, they were slanted slightly to allow for rain runoff. The Old Testament law prescribed that every house have a banister, parapet (NIV), or railing (HCSB) to prevent persons from falling off the roof (Deut. 22:8).¹²

The ancient Israelites were never revered for their architecture, and most of the homes in first-century Israel were not as splendid as contemporaneous homes in Rome or with homes in contemporary America. However, the humble simplicity of these houses provided a backdrop for the life and ministry of Jesus and His disciples. By learning more about first-century housing, we can gain a clearer picture of the events recorded in the New Testament, and apply a more meaningful application of Jesus’ teachings in our own lives. **B**

was (Luke 5:17-26). We get our word “ceramic” from the Greek word describing the tiles that these friends broke through. The text literally describes the friends as having “unroofed the roof” by “digging through” the roof (v. 19), just as a thief would dig through the dirt walls of houses.¹¹

The roofs performed some functions similar to that of patios in many modern American homes. It was a place for social activity, where people could go to relax and converse in the cool of the evening, or a place to sleep at night. Since the houses had very little ventilation, the rooftops were much more comfortable and not as dim and gloomy as the rooms inside the house. Men sometimes went to their rooftops to pray (Acts 10:9). People also used their rooftops for storage

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6. McRay, 789; Clark, “Brick, Sweat, and Tears,” 37-40; Clark, “The Four-Room House,” 43; Daniel-Rops, 253, 257.

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