

Iron Age Pillared House

The typical Israelite house in the Iron I period (c. 1200-1000 B.C.), and in later Biblical times as well, was home to both people and animals. About 50 feet long and 30 feet wide, on the average, it was a small house, but designed for efficiency.

The flat roof, made of earth and chalk, could be tamped down with a roller, as demonstrated, after the rainy season.

In the central, main room, food was prepared, often using ingredients stored in the pantry, or breadroom, at the back of the house. Here, a woman grinds grain, using upper and lower rubbing stones, after having readied a fire on the hearth in the middle of the room. Water could be drawn from the cistern hewn into the bedrock below the tamped-earth floor. To the left of the entrance to the breadroom, another domestic chore, weaving, is performed on a vertical loom.

The ground-floor side rooms provided plenty of stable space for the family's livestock, which was probably brought into the house at night. In winter, warmth radiating from the animals up to the second floor, where the family ate and slept, would have provided an effective, if malodorous, heating system. Upstairs, a bedroll for sleeping has been prepared.

Paving stones in the side rooms allowed secure footing as urine seeped into the earth below and between the stones. On the left, between the front wall and the first stone pillar, the artist has drawn a wooden gate. Between the other stone pillars, which separated the central room from the side stables, low curtain walls kept the animals in their place. Some of these curtain walls had built-in mangers. With the discovery of these ground-floor stables and curtain-wall mangers, we have a new and vivid understanding of the Biblical references to the "fattened" or "stall-fed" calf.

In fact, Luke must have had these mangers in mind when he said that Mary "brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). The first Christmas was very likely not located in a barn or cave, as crèche scenes usually depict, but in a farmhouse in Bethlehem that may have looked a lot like this house.



