

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 27

The House of David

Dr. Theo Klein was my first Hebrew teacher. A short man with wiry hair and wire framed glasses, Dr. Klein began the first day teaching us the alphabet. With each letter, he would write it on the board and then describe to us how the letter came to be:

א

“This is the first Hebrew letter. It is called *aleph* (א). Originally it was the picture of an ox! One of the meanings of the word *aleph* is ‘ox’.”

He then told us that if you turned your head just right, you could see the ox and its horns. I must confess that I never could really see the ox! While the *aleph* became the “A” we have in our alphabet today, it was not a vowel like our A. In fact, Hebrew does not have vowel letters like we do. More on vowels in another lesson!

ב

“This is the second letter called *beyt* (ב).” Dr. Klein pronounced the word like the “bait” we use to catch fish. “It was originally the picture for a house or tent. The Hebrew word *beyt* even means house. It is pronounced like a ‘B’ as long as the dot is inside it.”¹

Now that I could see! The letter did in fact look like a simple tent or three-sided house.

ג

“This is the third letter called *gimel* (ג). It was originally a picture of a camel! We pronounce it like the letter ‘G’.”

Now I was not sure I could see the camel in the letter, but I did realize that the order of our letters in the alphabet had just diverged. I was thinking we had “A”

¹ The letter can be pronounced as a “v” sound rather than a “b” sound depending upon whether it has a dot (a “*dagesh*”) in the middle of it. More on that issue in a later lesson.

and “B;” therefore, the next letter should be “C.” But I was wrong! It was “A,” “B,” “G”!

ד

Dr. Klein explained, “This is the fourth Hebrew letter. It is called *daleth* (ד). Originally the letter was the picture for a door. Pronounce it like our letter ‘D’.”

If that was a door, I thought, then it had a mighty big hinge!

Dr. Klein went through all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet that day. He wanted us to know them and be able to recognize them on sight.

He gave us some other details about Hebrew basics. He taught us that Hebrew is written from right to left rather than as in English, which goes left to right. I experimented by writing *Hebrew* backward (*werbeH*) thinking I might take my notes right to left, but I quickly realized I would not have an easy time studying those notes!

In our class, we are going to experiment trying to learn the Hebrew alphabet. This is not to train Hebrew scholars, for that is an arduous task beyond this class, and beyond me as a teacher. Our goal is simply to give us some better tools to study the Old Testament. Of course, the ultimate goal is to use this as a way to better understand our LORD and his relationship with us.

Today, we start with these four letters: ד ג ב א *aleph, beyt, gimel, and daleth*. They fit quite nicely in this lesson as this week we study the “House of David.”

בֵּית (BEYT) “HOUSE”

As we start this lesson, we have the Hebrew word *beyt*, meaning “house.” Reading right to left, we see the first letter which itself is called *beyt*. *Beyt* in Hebrew has a fuller usage in Hebrew than the typical American usage of our word “house.” This fuller range of meaning is important in understanding the lesson. For us to understand the Hebrew idea in the word *beyt*, and better understand its meaning when we read it in our Bibles, we need to start with the word itself.

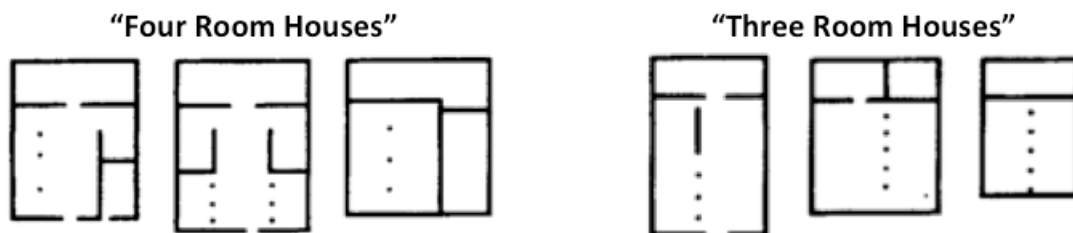
In American usage, we generally consider the “house” a structure where a person or people live. It is a freestanding structure to distinguish it from an apartment or condominium. Often, people distinguish a “house” from a “home” because the “home” denotes the warm feelings associated with living in the “house.” I can honestly say, “Becky turns our house into a home.”

One meaning of the Hebrew “house” (*beyt*) was the structure where people lived. In Biblical times, there was not the modern distinction of an apartment or condominium. In fact, most Hebrew “houses” (in this sense) shared at least a common wall with another house.

Archaeology has uncovered a wealth of information about the Hebrew home during Old Testament times both before and after King David. In hundreds of ruins in the hills of Israel, archaeologists have uncovered Iron Age villages that sprung up, almost overnight, during the time many scholars associate with the Hebrew settlement in Canaan.² An amazing find in these ruins is the presence of a basic house plan that pervades through the Highlands in Galilee, the Central Hill-Country and the Transjordan plateau. For six centuries, this same basic house structure was used in Israel.³

These structures go by several names. Some call them “four-room houses” and “three-room houses.” Others call them “pillared houses.” I tend to use the latter because four-room houses had more than four rooms! (And three-room houses had more than three!) Archaeologists have not found an entire structure intact, but they have uncovered these house’s foundations and parts of the basic walls. They have found enough to give a good bit of information, increasing our understanding of ancient Hebrew culture.

Here are two sets of typical foundation and basic wall structures from the archaeologists:

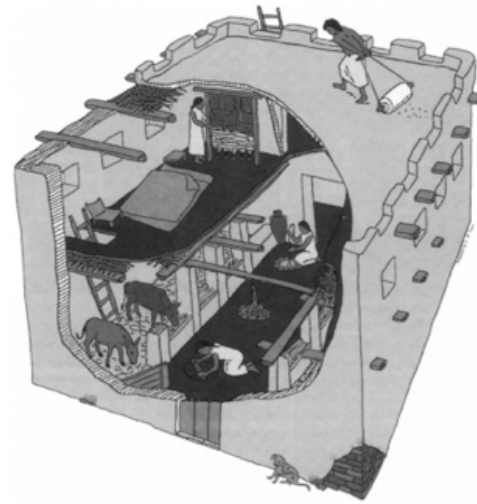


² We have discussed this in earlier lectures on the archaeology of Israel’s settlement in Canaan. Links to those lectures and their respective handouts are found on the class website: www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

³ Faust, Avraham and Bunimovitz, Shlomo, “The Four Room House: Embodying Iron Age Israelite Society,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66:22-31 (2003).

The thickness of the walls and the presence of stone staircases with some of the homes lead scholars to conclude that these were two-story structures. The general consensus now is that the downstairs of the “four-room” pillared house was divided into four basic areas that were then perhaps subdivided into rooms. The upstairs also had rooms, although the scholars must speculate on what the upstairs layout might have been.

In the downstairs, there were pillars that marked off one side (or two) from a central room. There was also a back room that ran the entire length of the structure. The central room likely had the door to the outside. The back room (which may have been subdivided) was likely for storage. In the sides, there was a limited amount of room for select livestock. This was a holding place in the winter months, but also likely where select stock was kept and regularly fed. This is where one might keep the “fatted calf” that was butchered on very special occasions.⁴



A reconstruction of a four-room house illustrating possible uses. King and Stager at 29.

In this sense, when King Saul visited the medium at Endor to have Samuel conjured up for some pre-battle advice, the woman fed Saul:

Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly killed it, and she took flour and kneaded it and baked unleavened bread of it, and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night (1 Sam. 28:24-25).

This structure for a house is found in the urban centers as well as the rural setting. Houses of the rich and houses of the poor follow the same basic layout, although they might vary in size and location (some rules of real estate are constant in all civilizations!). As a general rule, the houses in the urban cities are smaller than those in the rural villages. But since scholars set over 90 percent of the population as “nonurban,”⁵ we put greater focus on the 90 percent and not the small number of city dwellers and townsfolk.

⁴ Stager, Lawrence E., “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 260 (1985) at 15.

⁵ Perdue, Leo, *et al.*, *Families in Ancient Israel*, (Westminster John Knox 1997), at 6.

In the rural areas, these structures were not in isolation like an American home where a nice picket fence sets off one home from another. Instead, these homes were grouped together into a common area, frequently sharing at least one wall. The common area was enclosed and typically held a common oven and cooking hearth.

This conglomeration of homes into a common area seems to us like a small village, however, there was more to it than that. To better understand the Hebrew *beyt*, we need to add another word:

אב (“ab” or “av”)

“FATHER”

These two letters, the first two in the Hebrew alphabet, are also the first two letters in the name “Abraham.” Father Abraham appropriately begins with *ab* because *ab* means, “father.” Hundreds of times in the Hebrew Old Testament, we read the phrase *beyt ab* (בֵּית-אָב). This is where we see a departure between the Hebrew idea of *beyt* from the American word for house.

The literal translation of *beyt ab* is “father’s house,” but the idea is perhaps better expressed in English as the “family household.” The *beyt ab* was the extended family that was structured around the inheritance rights of the oldest male in the household. The oldest male was the *ab* or father. His wife, his children, and his mother (if living) all lived with the *ab*. Of course, if a man’s father was living, the father was the *ab*, not the son! When a daughter married, she left and became part of the *beyt ab* of her new husband’s family.

For the great majority of Israel’s population in this time period, the *beyt ab* consisted of an assortment of these structures as the living space for the full extended family. Here in a “village” setting, we find the “house of the father” where three generations would likely dwell together, parents, married sons with their children, unmarried daughters, unmarried aunts, various assorted relatives and even servants. This is the “*beyt*” or house of the father.⁶

In this sense, we now see passages like the instructions for the Passover lamb:

Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses [*beyt ab*], a lamb for a household [*beyt*] (Ex. 12:3).

These highland villages varied in size, but most were less than ½ acre each. (smaller than an American football field). The smaller ones likely held around 50

⁶ Faust at 26.

people, the larger ones perhaps 150 people. They would have consisted of several *beyt ab*'s related to each other in a larger social group called a "clan."

Scholars believe these were family groups who lived together often out of necessity. The archaeologists have shown that the compounds would typically have a common cooking area, common holding areas for livestock (apart from the individual small area for several select animals), but no administrative or public buildings or areas. In other words, these were not little towns in our modern sense of the word. These were family compounds with a group of "kinfolk" living together and working to sustain life.⁷

As we unfold the "*beyt ab*" we see a fuller family that shared living spaces, shared tools, shared farms, orchards, and vineyards, and worked to a common goal.⁸ The *beyt ab* would have these several linked dwellings interconnected both physically and functionally. The roles of men, women and children can reasonably be understood by combining the insight from Biblical passages with the archaeological finds. A number of well-written books are available for those who wish to reconstruct a "day in the life" of an Israelite living in one of these settings during the time of King David.⁹

For most of us, it takes a mental decision for us to stop projecting our 21st century mentality and experiences into the Biblical texts and archaeology of Biblical times. These people in these villages were banded together not simply out of some romantic notion of extended family life. It was a matter of survival and economic necessity. They had no restaurants, no grocery stores, no running water, and no UPS deliveries. They had to clear their own fields, without the use of bulldozers, to plant what they would eat. They had to maintain those crops, harvest the crops, process and store what was to be eaten while reserving what was needed for seeding the next crop cycle.

They had livestock that supplied milk, yoghurt, and cheese, as well as materials for clothing, and, on rare occasions, meat. These people labored from early in the morning till late at night every day, save Sabbath, to stay alive. Infant mortality

⁷ There is a Hebrew term for these groups, *mishpachah*, which is often translated as "clan" or "family." Old Testament scholar and archaeologist Carol Meyers calls them a "residential kinship group." See, Meyers, Carol, "*The Family in Early Israel*," in Perdue, *et al.* at 12-13.

⁸ Some wonder at the seemingly inordinate number of Israelite laws that pertain to the sexual mores and interactions among family. Compared to modern society, there are a disproportionate number of laws that cover issues of incest and interfamily taboos. This integrated living gives fertile ground for problems of this sort. It makes sense why the legal proscriptions would be so prominent. See generally, Meyers at 18.

⁹ See, Perdue, *et al.*, as well as King, Philip and Stager, Lawrence, *Life in Biblical Israel*, (Westminster John Knox 2001).

was high (half of children did not live to their 5th birthday)¹⁰ and life expectancy was low. Scholarly consensus is that most men did not live much past age 40 and women likely less due to the difficulties of multiple pregnancies and deliveries.¹¹

The *beyt ab* (family group) would travel together to Jerusalem (post-temple) or Shiloh (pre-temple) for annual feasts and sacrifices. These family outings were no doubt significant releases from the daily toil of the homestead—a 3,000 year old version of the family vacation! Understanding the large nature of the *beyt ab*, helps us better see why Jesus’ parents left Jerusalem to return home thinking that Jesus was with some other family members in the caravan (Lk 2:41-51).

Stepping into this world, we can read and better understand the Scriptures. The psalmist’s blessing makes more sense:

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!
You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
Your children will be like olive shoots around your table.
Behold thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.
The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!
May you see your children’s children!
Peace be upon Israel! (Psalm 128).

Beyond these family units and the clans that incorporated even more extended *beth ab*’s, we find another larger use of the Hebrew *beyt*. For this we add to *beyt* the name David.

בֵּית דָּוִד (BEYT DAVID) “HOUSE OF DAVID”

In 1993, under the direction of Avraham Biran, the archaeological dig at the ruins of the ancient Israelite city of Dan in north Israel uncovered a most remarkable find. Three fragments of a stone stele were discovered.¹² Over the next ten years,

¹⁰ King at 41.

¹¹ King at 37.

¹² Biran, A., and Naveh, J., “An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 43:81-98. See the general write up in Hoffmeier, James, *The Archaeology of the Bible*, (Lion Hudson 2008) at 87.

over 200 articles were published discussing the inscriptions. Almost all of these articles focus on six letters found on the fifth line from the bottom of the largest fragment. Those six letters are *beyt david* (בית דוד).¹³

These letters are translated as “house of David” and they mark the earliest known reference to David outside of the Bible. Because the very existence of David is challenged by a group of scholars cynical about the historical value of the early monarchal times recorded in the Old Testament, this finding created quite a stir. One group of scholars has tried to show the

inscription to be a fake. The recent assessment by George Athas has made that position very difficult to hold.¹⁴ Athas makes a very compelling argument that the text is real and datable to a fairly specific time range of 800BC (give or take twenty years).

While the majority of scholars accept the authenticity of the inscription, there is still a debate over how to read it. The vast majority of scholars see in this inscription, a reference to the biblical David and either his “*beyt*” as his lineage or his “*beyt*” as the city Jerusalem.

The idea of the “house of David” or the *beyt David*, is not a foreign one to Biblical students. Early in David’s life, *beyt David* was used to refer to the physical structure where David was living:

Saul sent messengers to David’s house to watch him, that he might kill him in the morning. But Michal, David’s wife, told him, "If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed." (1 Sam. 19:11).

There came a time, however, when David was seen as the father of a much larger group. After Saul died in 2 Samuel 2:4, we read that David was anointed king

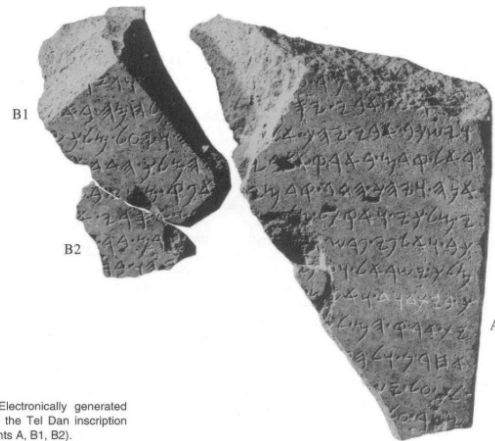


Fig. 1. Electronically generated image of the Tel Dan inscription (Fragments A, B1, B2).

Photo from Schniedewind, William, “Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu’s Revolt,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 302 (1996) at 76

¹³ Walter E. Aufrecht gives this count in his review of George Athas’s book on the Tel Dan inscription. “What does the Tel Dan Inscription Say and How do we Know It?”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 345 (Feb. 2007), 64.

¹⁴ Athas, George, *The Tel Dan Inscription: A Reappraisal and a New Interpretation*, (Sheffield Academic Press 2003).

over the “house of Judah.” From there the followers of David became known as the “house of David” or *beyt David*. As David warred with the followers of Saul, 2 Samuel 3:1 uses this phrase:

There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David [*beyt David*]. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.

There is a great pun on *beyt* in the narrative between Nathan and David when David was planning to build a temple for the LORD. Nathan goes to David on behalf of God and says, in essence, “You are planning on building God a house? No! God is, however, going to build you one!” This is found in 2 Samuel 7:5-16,

"Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a **house [*beyt*]** to dwell in? I have not lived in a **house [*beyt*]** since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a **house [*beyt*]** of cedar?"' Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a **house [*beyt*]**... And your **house [*beyt*]** and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.'"

Later, after the death of David and the death of Solomon, when Israel split away from Judah, the narrative in 1 Kings records it as a rebellion against the *beyt David*, the house of David:

So Israel has been in rebellion against the **house of David [*beyt David*]**to this day (1 Kings 12:9).

The prophets frequently spoke to the people as the “house of David” (*beyt David*). Isaiah cried out, “Hear then, O House of David [*beyt David*]!” (Is. 7:13). Jeremiah declared, “O house of David [*beyt David*]! Thus says the LORD” (Jer. 21:12).

By the time of Zechariah, the “house of David” (*beyt David*) takes on a clear messianic role:

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn" (Zech. 12:10).

Between the time of the Old and the New Testament, some Jewish scholars wrote commentaries on certain Old Testament Scriptures. Parts of a number of these commentaries were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. In cave 4 a fragment numbered 174 commented on the end times using the interchange between Nathan and David. This commentary explained that God’s promise to build David a house [*beyt*] “refers to the branch of David...who will rise up in Zion in the last days.”¹⁵

By the time of the New Testament, the gospel writer Luke notes the significance of the house of David in the birth of Christ explaining both that Joseph was of the “house of David” (Lk 1:27), and that

The LORD God of Israel...has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Lk 1:68-69).

Throughout the life of David, the life of his son Solomon, the days of the monarchy, the days of the latter prophets, and into the New Testament, the *beyt David*, the house of David, carried special significance not simply as some physical building, nor as the extended family group living together, but of a legacy of promise. This legacy was not simply a genetic promise, but was an assurance that God was at work doing something extraordinary of eternal significance in the *beyt David*.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” (Ps. 127:1).

The Psalmist is not insisting that God needs to build the physical structure you or I live in. Nor is he insisting that God build a family compound. Life itself is futile in all its permutations if it is not done in conjunction

¹⁵ Garcia Martinez, F., and Tigchelaar, Eibert, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, (Brill 2000), Vol. 1 at 353.

with the plans and work of the LORD. Examine what is before you this week. Is God's hand in it? If not, how can you make changes to see that God works to build your family, your job, your legacy? Entrust your house to God and live in it to his glory!

2. *"In my Father's house are many rooms."* (Jn. 14:2).

The gospel of John was written in Greek. We cannot fail to see the significance, however, of the Hebrew idea of the *"beyt ab,"* the "Father's house" in these words of Jesus. In a statement that makes clear sense as reflecting the compound or gathering of houses, Jesus notes that in the Father's house are many rooms or abodes (Greek *mone* μονη). Jesus then adds that this is where his followers belong. It is no less true for his followers today than it was for his followers then. We belong in the Lord's compound. We are under his guidance, and his protection. Over and over, the writer of Hebrews refers to God's followers as the "house of God." We work towards a common end as part of a larger group. This week, let us focus on our life as part of God's household, seeing what we do not in typical American independence, but in Godly service and cooperation with our Father's house.

3. *"Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered"* (Rev. 5:5).

Messiah Jesus is the promise of the House of David. He is the one who reigns forever, both as seed of David and as King of God's people. He sits eternally on the throne as the conquering Messiah. Raise up his banner with pride in his victory. See in his meekness and humility the strength and courage that brought him into glory and gave us both forgiveness and an example to live by. This is real. Let us recognize it, give daily thanks, and rejoice in it!

WANT MORE?

Let's work on our Hebrew! Here are the homework chores:

1. Each day (preferably twice a day) between now and next Sunday say aloud the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet ten times! "Aleph, Beyt, Gimel, Daleth." Now, nine more!
2. Let's practice writing the block letters so that we remember what they look like. Several times this week, write (or doodle) the letters. The block form of the letters are given on the next page with room to write them.

3. If you do this and have some time, drop me a line at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com . It will let me know this is a worthwhile endeavor!

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