

This Old House: Daily Life in Ancient Israel and Jordan

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Studies that involve archaeology and the Bible have long focused considerable attention on the issues of ancient history and how texts and artifacts can be understood together, in particular the Bible and the material cultural remains from the Ancient Near East. Areas of agreement have always generated enthusiasm, whereas problems produce debate and dissension. Some of the most contentious (modern) battles in the world of biblical archaeology have been fought over the interpretation of archaeological data versus the interpretation of the Bible.

A more recent impulse, driven by anthropology and the social sciences, has recommended that understanding daily life in antiquity might offer important insights into actual existence in the biblical world. The focus here has to do more with human beings than history, more with actual life and survival than major events, more with the essentials of living and belief than wars and dynastic collapses. The past several years have seen the publication of a tent full of books and articles on daily life—in ancient Israel and Jordan, in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, and so forth.

What can we learn from this avenue of inquiry, which might enhance our reading of the Bible and open to us new windows of discovery about biblical characters and their everyday stories? And how do we access this information?

Certainly we should do it with the help of a lot of TLC—attention to Time, Language, and Culture. We face considerable distance between us and people of antiquity, which forces us to find ways of bridging the gaps. Popular novels such as *The Red Tent* have grown out of a recent scholarly genre of narratives meant to help us



understand daily life in antiquity. Reading such stories ushers us into that world and thus permits us to see life at that time with more understanding. It is a way of removing our own shoes and replacing them with ancient sandals, taking off our garments and wearing their robes, setting aside to some degree our ways of thinking for theirs.

When we begin to examine the elements of daily life in ancient times, we discover people who struggled to survive in harsh conditions. Take the family of Eliyahu ben (son of) Berekyahu who lived on the western side of Kerem, a small one-acre village seven miles north of Jebus (later called Jerusalem). Twenty-nine-year-old Eliyahu (my god is Yahweh) and his wife of ten years, Yonah (dove), live with their three surviving children in a two-story house built and still occupied by Eliyahu's father Berekyahu (Blessed be Yahweh). Berekyahu's wife of fourteen years has died, and now he lives with a foreigner, Bat-Hadad (daughter of Hadad), a one-time domestic slave who belonged to his late wife. The one son they conceived together stays with them as well.

This is the family that we picture and often talk about during our annual archaeological expeditions in Jordan. Our sources for the projections we make about them include the Bible, archaeological remains, and recent anthropological approaches and theories. Trying to piece together the story of the Berekyahu family keeps us aware of the limitations of all of our sources.



Typical bedouin tent, showing many activities of daily life.

Recognizing our Limitations

The Bible writers, although preserving a few fleeting snapshots of daily family life in earliest Israel, never intended to provide modern readers with all the information they might want in order to carry on scientific investigations of the details that surrounded existence in their world. Their purposes lay elsewhere, especially in the arena of religious and moral instruction and divine invitation. This means we can honestly and adequately approach the concerns facing us here only by recognizing how much our quest differs from theirs.

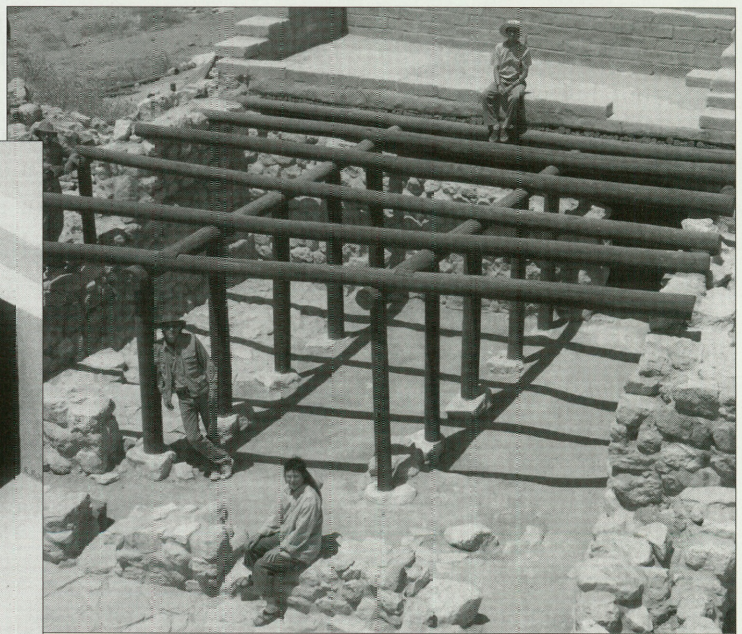
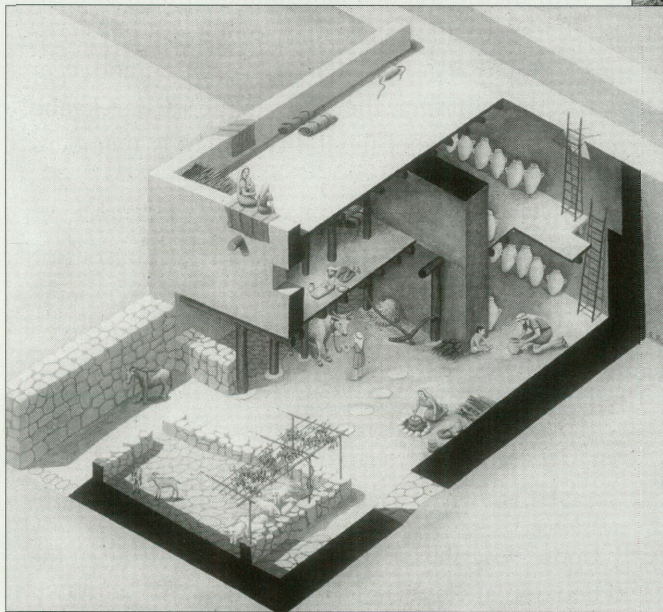
In addition, the Bible, bearing human fingerprints as well as divine credentials (the inspiration process), was transmitted to us by means of a relatively small group of mostly males over a long period in contexts that by and large were urban. Most families, especially during Israel's earliest history, did not live in urban centers. Rather, they lived out their lives as children and parents in households often surrounded by extended families or clans in the rural hinterland of the hill country. Hence the voices of the majority of men and almost all women and children received little or no hearing in the process by which our Bible came to us.

Just as important to our use of the Bible as a source of information about the life of ancient biblical characters is a hermeneutical concern of significant proportions. One cannot simply vault across barriers of time, language, and culture without regard for differences between our world and theirs. Ultimately, the task demands that we enter the ancient world as completely as possible, that we breathe ancient Palestinian hinterland air; experience the scents, sights, and sounds; and open ourselves to popular stories and worship; in other words, recapture the entire ethos that was ancient Israel.

Only then are we really in a position to translate principle, paradigm, or parable into our own ethos and make sensible comparisons. We will never completely succeed in this endeavor, of course, but we need to try. Limited in this regard or not, the Bible is still one of our best and most important sources of useful information about ancient life.

Although also helpful, archaeological remains pose their own set of restrictions for our investigation. For most of the past century archaeologists have concentrated on tells, major urban sites that, in the final analysis, can tell us little about how most of the populace

Below: Four-room house cutaway painting (Rhonda Root). *Right:* Four room house at Tall al-'Umayri, following excavation and partial restoration.



lived. As the currently available evidence demonstrates, earliest Israel was almost entirely settled in small, rural villages without all the accoutrements of city living.

Only recently have the sketchy outlines of a picture begun to emerge about life in general and about families in particular. From roughly the time of David onward, we begin to see huge developments in the political world of ancient Palestine, with shifts away from more rural tribal entities to emerging nations. With this change came the inevitable social upheaval in the economic, domestic, and religious spheres of existence. Here is where tell archaeology becomes more important, but it still does not yield the entire picture.

The paucity of ancient written remains also contributes to the limitations of archaeology. If only the ancients had left written instructions for us on how to interpret wall fragments, standing stones, and broken pieces of pottery! We would certainly be in a better position to deal with questions of structure and function if they had, questions about the varying roles of men, women, and children; about how deeply religious experience permeated every waking moment; about how people survived in and made sense of their world.

However, even with all those limitations, there is much we can learn by making good use of the tools we have to examine the home of Eliyahu and Yonah for clues to the story of their daily life.

Entering the House of Berekyahu

Built somewhat crudely of fieldstones chinked with large pebbles and small cobbles on the first story and with homemade, sun-dried mud bricks for the second floor, Berekyahu's home, like surrounding buildings, consists of basically four rooms on each story. Entering from a courtyard on the eastern side, family members find themselves in the central room that measures almost eighteen feet long, six feet wide, and approximately six feet high. It appears larger than it really is because of two parallel rows of wooden posts on each side that separate it from two long side rooms, each about the same size as the central room.

A doorway at the end of one side room marks the entrance to the fourth room, which is about the same size as the others and stretches across the back width of the building. It is called a broad room or the inner room. Because walls of fieldstone have to be two to three feet thick to stand, thereby consuming tons of stone and lots of space, and because of primitive architectural techniques that do not allow wide spans between support walls, remaining space in a four-room house like this is fairly limited.

Two of the long rooms, the central and the north side rooms, have beaten earth floors. A cooking hearth has been placed along the outer wall in the side room. One can also find nearby farming implements used



with draft animals for agricultural purposes. The back (inner) room is filled with thirty to thirty-five large, three-foot-high storage jars made of clay. Over all these rooms, the first story is covered with a ceiling that consists of large wooden beams, smaller branches laid across the beams, and reeds situated on them, all plastered over with mud that forms the floor of the next story. Maintenance is an ongoing chore, requiring major investments of time and energy.

Paving stones cover the floor of the south side room. This room houses the domestic animals at night and in winter, the cobbled surface covered with straw that allows for drainage of liquid animal waste. Since the rows of posts that separate the side rooms from the central room provide only a partial wall, along with wooden mangers for the animals, animals and people learn to live together whether or not they like it. Besides, animal warmth on cool nights contributes to heating in the house, even if in the process it adds to the smell. Animals in the house also signal the presence of potentially dangerous insects and infections.

The second story of the house is laid out in a fashion similar to the first, but it is used entirely for human occupation. The central long room has additional food preparation equipment—a huge basalt lower grinding stone along with other food preparation implements like small stone pounders and grinders and ceramic vessels for cooking and serving food. Various members of the extended family use the side rooms for sleeping.

The back room, like that on the first floor, is filled entirely with additional storage jars. Ricketty wooden ladders lead up to the second story and then to a flat roof, where, in the summer, the family stores harvested grain and wool and where they sleep on hot nights. There the chamber pot sits, as well—to be emptied daily—along with the roof roller, a large cylindrical stone used to keep the mud roof together after each winter rain shower.

All told, the house itself took months to construct. There were thousands of large fieldstones and smaller chink stones; hundreds of mud bricks; scores and scores of felled trees for wooden posts, beams, rafters, and branch cross members; stacks and stacks of reeds brought up from wadis near the Jordan Valley; and donkey load after donkey load of lime for plaster and mortar, which had to be burned from the local limestone at tremendous cost and labor.

The weight of the materials alone is over 450 tons. Then there is the headache of ongoing maintenance to

keep the house functional. It is a never-ending job that demands time, energy, and expense.

Eliyahu, Yonah, Beninu, Rivkah, and Devorah, along with their extended family, make this house their home. The space allows each person only about eighty or ninety square feet in which to live, work, and sleep. However, this building, the “household” of Berekyahu, permits some degree of flexibility as family members need to move about.

There is a large courtyard off the three long rooms that provides open-air space for getting out of the house and for stabling more animals if necessary. This arrangement also permits sharing within the collective labor force of men, women, and older children, a feature necessary for survival.

Survivor—The Ancient Edition

R. B. Coote describes a menacingly difficult life in his 1990 book on ancient Israel. According to him, most inhabitants:

were poor and undernourished, living at or below the level of subsistence, surrounded with dirt, animal excrement, fleas, lice, mosquitoes, and other insects. Work was hard, food dear, water scarce, famine and drought a constant threat. Rain was unpredictable. On average every third year brought inadequate rainfall; often drought years arrived back to back. Pests, blight, and mildew were ubiquitous. Rats, mice, birds, and insects ate more of the food than the people did. Moreover, political forces largely beyond the working family's control intruded upon the productive regime, thus keeping the family on subsistence fare at the mercy of erratic circumstances, and compelling them to adopt short-term goals with catastrophic long-term effects.

The hardships of village life left the people susceptible to the spoliations of disease and violence. More infants and children died than survived. Girls were especially vulnerable, since parents favored boys. Persons who grew to adulthood did not normally reach their genetic potential. Villagers were often stunted in their physical and mental development. Diseases included environmental afflictions such as malaria, illnesses caused by unsanitary conditions such as dysentery, trachoma, typhus, hookworm, and cholera, malnutri-



Left: Bones from the cemetery at biblical Heshbon. *Below:* Artifacts, mostly tied to everyday life, found at an Iron Age farmstead in Jordan.

tion and its repercussions, venereal disease, rabies, leprosy, and alcoholism. Not all of these were fatal, and not all limited to the village.... [T]he debilitating of poverty made life short and hard for the working people of Palestine. Joys there were, and glad songs and dances celebrated weddings, harvest, recovery, and vindication. The village bard sang the people's stories, the women about victory, requital, and pride. The undertone of this period, however, was the exploitation, exhaustion, fevers, rashes, itches, toothaches, fractures, mutilations, pains and hazards of childbirth and other miseries of pre-industrial village life, and the most common songs in people's hearts were the lament and complaint.¹

Archaeology has uncovered in latrines the indestructible egg casings of tape worms and, on combs, lice egg casings. Broken bones, arthritic joints, skulls that reveal the (sometimes successful) trepanation operations to relieve pressure on the brain all show up in the record. Without the germ theory, without modern medical practice or pharmaceutical miracles, without the modern fetish with clearness, illness and debilitation affected everyone except the most hardy. These problems were even more difficult to take when accompanied by religious notions of divine causality as a result of past transgressions.

In addition to the bug-infested conditions and disease, the hardships of any preindustrial society also included military interventions. Archaeology and the



Bible are replete with evidence that people were forever waging wars, conflicts with disastrous affects on the population. There were no Geneva Conventions to control treatment of the conquered, no limits to which at least some aggressors of antiquity went to intimidate and humiliate unfortunate segments of the populace, no strictures on the brutality allowed against foreigners, women, the oppressed, the landscape.

Particularly poignant are depictions on stone of battle scenes and the occasional gruesome discovery of the skeletal remains of a war-ravaged village or household, as the one at Tall al-Umayri, where the burned,



Right: Stone grinders for turning grain into flour. Below: Clay figurine of woman kneading bread.



splayed bone fragments of four individuals (an adult male, another adult, a teenager, and a small child) appeared as mute testimony to the disaster of warfare waged against daily life. Nor was there any escaping the fact that virtually all wars were sacred in nature and carried religious consequences in their outcomes.

Death and burial, although accepted as a normal part of ancient life, became traumatic if experienced early or violently. For much of the Iron Age, life expectancy for men was between thirty-five and forty years and for women thirty to thirty-five, due perhaps as much to childbirth as anything else. Half of a couple's children might not survive until puberty. The hazards of childbearing and childhood sometimes contributed as many as 50 percent of the skeletons excavated in communal burial caves.

Provision

How did the ancients counter these problems?

By its very definition, the term *provision* suggests a gift, something donated. This is intentional, because the ancients perceived God or the gods as the source of all things, particularly all things good. Food, water, families, everything needed for survival—*kulu min 'allah*, "All

is from God," as they say in Arabic today. For the inhabitants of ancient Palestine, God/the gods was/were actively engaged in all aspects of life. Nothing escaped the watchful eye of the divine, nothing.

Anthropologists have noted the extensive role religion played in all societies, especially prescientific, preindustrial ones. Theologian Rudolph Otto uses the term *mysterium tremendum* to describe a sense of awe at the divine powers apparent everywhere in the ancient world. The result was not only adoration of the deity, but a sense of what he calls *numinous unease*, uncertainty about the intentions of the divine.

Although God/the gods might care deeply about his/her people, one has to bear in mind the difference between humanity and deity and the place of humans in the larger scheme of things. Before meteorology, humans sought explanations of weather phenomena, including destructive events, in the will of God/the gods. Before insecticides, people looked for religious reasons behind the onslaught of devastating locust swarms. Before advanced medical science, villagers pondered spiritual justification for deadly bouts of the plague. All life was wrapped up in the attitudes and actions of the deity, all life.

The Bible and archaeology clearly support this worldview. As not only the biblical stories, but also other textual and artifactual remains demonstrate, religion was a powerful and pervasive influence. In order to calm the chaos created by numinous unease, detailed worship guidelines developed, a gift from God/the gods to help restore order and structure to life. So did all kinds of cultic architecture like altars, shrines, and temples, as well as worship paraphernalia like bronze figurines of mostly male deities and ceramic figurines of mostly female deities. These are found virtually everywhere. Whether they were all idols or perhaps at

least some of them more like good luck charms is debated. But everyone had them.

As several recent scholarly treatments of religion in ancient Israel reveal in their titles, there appears to have been a good deal of religious diversity, especially in early, tribal Israel (the book of Judges makes this clear, too), as well, of course, as among surrounding peoples. The varied names for God in the Old Testament, studied in context, along with abundant archaeological evidence, also argue for a picture more complex than might first meet the eye.

It is more than apparent that at least some Israelites, even up through the sixth century B.C. and beyond, worshiped not only Yahweh, the national deity, but also a spouse, Asherah or Anat. No wonder some of the prophets came unglued! This provides the background for religious uncertainties uttered several times in the Yonah story and an important insight into the life of the people of the land, the common people.

In any case, it was God/the gods who held primary responsibility for providing the inhabitants of ancient Palestine with food and water. Although both came at no small investment of energy and expense, they were received with gratitude and gifts to the deity. Harvests were always times of celebration, and thanksgiving offerings reflected the joy (and relief) that provisions were in place for another year.

Water came from springs and streams where available, and wells, reservoirs, and cisterns where constructed. Food consisted of what could be collected, cultivated, corralled, or captured during the early centuries of the Iron Age (ca. 1200–1000 B.C.), and what could be grown, traded, and purchased when an expanded market economy took over after 1000 B.C. Diets consisted primarily of grains like barley and wheat; legumes like garbanzos and lentils; nuts; olives; vegetables; fruits like figs, dates, pomegranates, and grapes; and herbs gathered here and there, as well as spices brought in from afar when trade was possible.

Most inhabitants of ancient Palestine were vegetarian except during occasional religious feasts, when parts of the sacrificial animal were eaten, and during festal events of hospitality that surrounded weddings, funerals, special visits, and so forth. Meat normally came from domestic animals like sheep and goats, as did milk, cheese, butter, and yogurt. Wild animals like gazelle and deer provided part of the diet, as excavated bones indicate. So did fish and fish products.

Another aspect of provision, although less con-

cretely so, was the family, along with extended circles of community. Ancient culture structured society differently than we do in the West today. We begin with the individual and then behaviorally, ethically, morally move to larger entities of family, extended family, church, school, and so forth. Iron Age Israelites began with community and then moved to the individual.

A person had meaning and significance only as part of a group like the family or extended family or clan or tribal entity. Life was wrapped up in family activities. Married sons lived in the same house as their nuclear family, a room having been expanded, subdivided, or added to accommodate spouses and children/grandchildren. People seldom lived far from relatives, often in the same house or compound. No wonder so many laws governed interpersonal relationships among family members in the Old Testament. Based on an ethic of shame/honor, behavior was judged right or wrong on how it affected the group, not so much the individual.

It was the sense of community, however, that gave strength and cohesion to this culture. Activities that surrounded domestic life, religion, leisure, recreation, and making a living involved the entire family. Theirs was a shared enterprise. Eating, working in the fields, caring for the animals, worship, playing—all were done together. No one went alone, unless forced by circumstances beyond their control.

The Family That Works Together

On a typical summer day for the family of Berekyahu there are lots of chores. Yonah, Beninu, and Rivkah set about milking the goats early, then later guide the flock to pasture and water, and care for domesticated fowl. Breakfast must be prepared and cooked. This means going after water from the spring at the base of the hill on which the village sits; collecting and grinding grain; kneading dough; baking thin, flat bread loaves in their small oven; and supplementing it with yogurt and cheese and some dried fruits and nuts. The fire takes the edge off the early morning chill in the house.

The family cannot linger long at home because early summer is the time for harvesting winter wheat; the barley is already gathered in. The whole family, including Berekyahu and Eliyahu's brother's family, which lives in a similar house next door, hike the mile



and one-half to the family field to begin the arduous task of cutting grain stalks, bundling them, transporting the bundles on their only donkey to the public threshing floor just south of the village on a large flat limestone outcropping.

There the grain is threshed and winnowed, then brought home for storage in the large pointed-bottom storage jars set into the dirt floor of the storeroom of their house. Since it rarely rains in the summer, the straw is bundled and stored on the roof along with other foodstuffs until needed for the livestock. The process only begins today; it will be weeks before they complete the job.

Agricultural work never ends. Planting various crops occupies the months of November through February. March finds the family hoeing weeds away from vegetables, grains, and in fallow plots. Barley and vetch mature for harvest in April/May; wheat, peas, and lentils in May/June; and chickpeas are ready in June. Figs first ripen in June, grapes from July through September. Pomegranates and the second harvest of figs are ready in August and September. October and November see olives come to maturity. Throughout the year repairs to high-maintenance agricultural terraces must be made, and there are tasks related to the livestock.

Working in the field reminds the Berekyahu extended family that their entire lives are totally wrapped around the use they make of their land for basic subsistence. Men, women, and children all participate in food production. Although the heavier jobs like clearing the land, plowing, and terrace management fall to the men, equal opportunity reigns when it comes to most tasks



Orchard scene in rural Jordan, likely similar to ancient springtime life on the farm.

associated with the planting of seed and sprouts and with the harvest and preservation of produce.

Just as Eliyahu and his father, along with his brother, who lives next door, stay busy managing the heavier duties, Yonah's work is also never done. Not only does she perform almost all food preparation tasks, she also oversees water procurement, firewood gathering, and protection of food stores. At mealtime, her husband has first choice, while she and the children eat whatever is left. In addition, some pottery-making always awaits attention, as does spinning, sewing, weaving, mending, and the baby she either carries, nurses, or trains almost all her life.

The amount of a woman's life span involving the physical aspects of motherhood—pregnancy, breastfeeding, caring for young children—may have been one-third or higher in ancient Israel and Jordan. With relatively few women surviving to menopause, and with marriage and childbirth beginning not long after the onset of puberty, as much as half of a woman's life span would have been taken up with maternity. One might say that motherhood and adulthood were practically coterminous.²

Yonah has heard from travelers about life among the many and varied nomadic tribes that course through the countryside and wonders while she labors in the warming sun if life on the move might ease a bit the never-ending, dreary burdens that settled agrarian pursuits generate. However, it turns out to be a passing fancy. She reminds herself of the extreme hardships of eternal camping and perpetual transience in formidable stretches of wilderness and unfamiliar steppe expanses.

Besides, she understands that nomadic women don't appear to enjoy the position of authority and control she does, especially because of the instability of nomadic tribal groups. For these people life depends more on such factors as weather patterns and the whims of nature.

Yonah also dreams of life in a posh villa at Bet Shean or Hazor. How wonderful if her drudgery might cease, eclipsed by a life of ease. Servants could care in large part for food production, and an urban market economy would free her for more leisurely pursuits. She might even reduce the time she invests in basic survival tactics from 80 to 90 percent to a more manageable 30 to 40 percent. More time and space would



Clockwise from left: Application of reeds into roof structure, laid across wooden branches. Below: Mohammad moving stone for household reconstruction. The manufacture of replica mud bricks for household construction.



be available to her, as well as better food and, with it, perhaps even greater health and longevity. Her entire life would take on a new look, a more pleasant existence with occasion for reflection and the broadening of her horizons.

However, this dream does not come without cost, either. According to friends of hers who claim to know, men control life in the city—military, economic, political, religious life. The less bureaucratic males need the services of women, the less important women become; that is, the lower their status and the more powerless they are. Besides, for most village women like Yonah, the big cities are centers of debauchery that tear away at the moral fabric of families and rural clans.

Perhaps life in Kerem is not so bad, after all, relatively speaking. Perhaps the role Yonah plays in the very economic undergirding of her family accords her more control of her life than she had realized, granting her something close to gender parity. “In a prestate society in which the household is the fundamental institution and the primary locus of power, females may even have a predominant role, at least within the broad parameters of household life.... [P]erhaps ... women had an important place wherever public life is not significantly differentiated from domestic life.”³

If one adds to this a reminder of Yonah’s role in the socialization and education of her children, her shared responsibilities in legal functions for the minors under her care, and her religious functions, a move to the city—even if possible—would likely jeopardize Yonah’s status and whatever gender parity she enjoys.⁴

Perspiration

As we see from the Berekyahu family, work, sweat, and tears accompanied the lives of ancient Israelites and their neighbors like uninvited guests who overstayed their welcome. If we are to capture what it meant to live and survive in biblical times, we must deal with unending hours of backbreaking labor. Constructing and maintaining houses, carrying on with agrarian pursuits, shepherding flocks, opening cottage industries, working at slave labor to stay alive and feed a family—these occupied the vast majority of the hours, days, weeks, months, and years of life.

These were not easy times, and the vast majority of people, at least most of those who survived, were hardy and industrious.



In antiquity as today, many issues had to be addressed before a house could be built. These include several phases of activity: planning and fund-raising; provision for labor; locating, collecting, transporting and preparing materials; preparation of the site; purchase or manufacture of appropriate tools; lifting, leveling and adhering building materials into place; finishing surfaces for pragmatic and aesthetic purposes; maintaining, reusing and renovating when necessary—all important considerations. Add to these the enduring heat, humidity, long hours, physical debilitations, pests and varying degrees of difficulty and danger inherent in the process, and the complexity of building a home in antiquity becomes even more apparent.⁵

The total 450-ton weight of the building material for the four-room house at 'Umayri represents a huge amount of labor, demanding months of hard work, potential hardship, self-taught skills, and thousands of fefafel sandwiches. Felling and preparing wood; gathering and installing stone walls; manufacturing sun-baked mud bricks; collecting wood and stone to burn for days to make lime for plaster and mortar—these are backbreaking tasks.

Agricultural and pastoral pursuits required endless activity and attention to a variety of details. Excavating and maintaining highly labor-intensive terraces on the hill slopes consumed immense amounts of time. So did the cyclical schedule of soil preparation, planting, weeding, tending, hoeing, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, transporting, and storing food crops, each with its own time and season.



The same applies to the care and feeding of orchard crops and viticulture, and the tending of sheep and goats on a regular basis (*left*). Also demanding were food preparation over open-air hearths and in clay ovens, and storage of food in

large ceramic *pithoi*, or jars, each capable of holding 180–220 pounds of grain. (The 60–70 *pithoi* in the house at Tall al-'Umayri would, if full, have weighed between seven and nine tons if the jars themselves are included.) Food disposal in trash heaps and middens added to the burden.

Other endeavors also demanded a lot from people in Bible times, particularly during the latter part of the Iron Age. Community industries in olive oil or wine production sprang up as the markets grew and flourished. So did cottage industries in pottery and textile manufacture, in addition to fabrication of agricultural implements and tools for all kinds of tasks. In addition, trade and commerce occupied merchants and traders.

Good Times and the Promise of Hope

Our description of ancient life may appear bleak, and in many ways it truly was. But archaeology has also produced evidence of what we think were recreational activities. Gaming pieces—or so it seems—occur regularly, as do ceramic toys like wheels, “buzzes,” and figurines. These suggest that fun and happiness characterized at least a portion of the routine of ancient life and survival.

Additionally, inhabitants of ancient Palestine found hope through a number of avenues. Religion, although conveying blame for all negative aspects of life, also bore tremendous potential for positive and redemptive experiences and reflections. It was a community's faith that empowered devotees to overcome ever-present adversities, creating anticipation for divine intervention, based in large part on remembered stories of past miracles. God's presence was realized in worship, whether encountered at a public temple or household shrine, in the forms of liturgy, music, prayer, celebration, and lament. Ancient worship was participatory and holistic, engaging the entire person and community.

Another important aspect of worship involved music. Artwork and artifacts as well as texts from the ancient world illustrate extremely well the ubiquitous presence of musical instruments associated with religious expression. Stringed, wind, brass, and percussion instruments accompanied the praises of the faithful, helping create a parallel world in which life's setbacks were themselves set back. Optimism and hope returned, even if for only a few hours or days. Music was also part of celebrations that marked birth, cir-

Clockwise from right: Clay incense stand from Taanach, with four registers perhaps representing the god of the Old Testament and Asherah, the goddess of nature. Clay figurines of pregnant women, likely used as good luck charms. Bronze bull from an Israelite site in the early Iron Age.



cumcision, and marriage.

Storytelling also granted relief from the ongoing grind of everyday chores and hardships. Whether performed at home by the elders in the family, at worship by priestly functionaries, or more popularly by itinerant bards in the town square, this aspect of everyday life was an essential component for the well-being of the community.

So, at the end of the day, what do we know about daily life in ancient Palestine? A lot, actually. The Bible, archaeology, and more recent anthropological approaches, even with their limitations, have opened countless new windows of discovery onto the world of the Bible.

Life was not easy. Families kept extremely busy working to survive. Yet the ancients demonstrated how to face problems together with hopeful promise, and that is a lesson worth thinking about as we leave the ancient world behind and reenter our own. Storytelling, community, and worship still offer the promise of hope for daily life.



Notes and References

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