

## HOME AND FAMILY IN BIBLE TIMES

### Where They Lived (2)

#### One Room Houses

When we think of living in a *house*, a particular picture comes to mind— four outside walls with windows, a shingled roof, a comfortable interior with furniture and separate rooms. In Bible times, houses were not nearly so extravagant, but they were still quite functional.

#### How a House was Used

There is a difference between the way the Jews viewed their houses in Old Testament times and the way we do today. Now, the house is considered the primary "living area" for a family. Most household work is done inside and time "at home" is usually time spent inside. Back then, however, a family would do most of its "living" outside the house and then come in for protection from the elements and for sleeping. The house was considered a *shelter* or *refuge* more than a living quarters (or what we might call a *home*).

##### Scripture Reference

See how the imagery of a *shelter* finds expression in descriptions of God.

Ps 61:3-4  
Ps 143:9

#### Construction of a House

**Walls:** Made of bricks (mud dried in the sun). Sometimes rough sandstones set in mud could be used. Only the most wealthy people could have houses made of hewn stones (1 Kgs 7:9; Is 9:8-10)

**Floor:** Hard-packed dirt

**Roof:** Beams were placed from wall to wall and then covered with a matting of reeds and brush. The reeds, in turn, would be covered with a coat of mud, sand, and pebbles. A roller would be used to make the roof smooth. Since the roof was often used as another "room" of the house, a low wall would generally be built around the edge to keep people from falling off (Dt 22:8).



Because of the material with which the roofs were constructed, certain things could be expected like *grass on the housetops* (Ps 129:5-7), *leaking roofs*, *thieves breaking in* (Mt 6:19), and *snakes in the walls* (Amos 5:19).

##### Scripture Reference

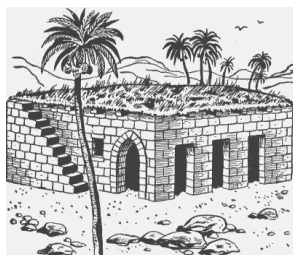
In Rev 3:7-8 the "open door" does not refer primarily to an opportunity. Doors were open when people were in the house and indicated that outsiders were welcome. What, then, is Rev 3:8 really

**Windows:** These nearly always opened toward the back of the house (not the street side) and were made of wooden shutters or latticework.

**Doors:** Hinged doors were commonly made of sycamore wood. The door would be opened at sunrise and and left open throughout the day. A closed door was a sign that something shameful had happened in the family. (The "open door" custom was not held in city homes.)

**Furniture:** Furniture was simple and meager. Carpets or mats for sleeping; perhaps a chest for storage; a lamp; a broom; a hand-mill for grinding; a few bottles for storing water or wine. A fireplace would occupy space in the middle of the room.

**Sleeping:** Usually the whole family would sleep together (Lk 11:7) on a slightly raised platform inside the house (in case of rain). In good weather, the roof could also be used for sleeping quarters.



### The Roof—A Busy Place

A little more should be said about the *roof* of the house, since there are so many references to it in the Scriptures. For most of the year, it was more pleasant to spend time on the roof than in the house (1 Sam 9:26). The roof was also used as a **place**

**for storage** (grain and fruit). Consider how Rahab hid the spies on her roof (Josh 2:6). The roof was also used as a **gathering place**. Like a crowd might gather in the streets, the oriental people would go to the housetops to see what was going on. **Public proclamations** would be spoken from the rooftops as well. Jesus used this imagery when He talked of preaching His word (Mt 10:27). The roof was commonly used as a place of **worship and prayer** (Zeph 1:5; Ac 10:9). In the time of Christ, roofs became **ways of escape** in times of trouble. Since the houses were located close to each other, passage could be made by "the road of the roofs" if the streets were not safe or too crowded. No doubt this is what Jesus was referring to in Lk 17:31 as He described the end of the world.

### Multi-Room Houses

Houses of two rooms or more were generally found in town where the wealthier families could afford to live. Many of the houses mentioned in the New Testament would have been of the multi-room variety. In such eastern dwellings, the rooms would not be placed side by side as we are used to, but they would be constructed around an open courtyard and within an outer wall. Outside the wall, the house would be very plain and ordinary looking (unlike our western houses which owners try to make very attractive on the outside).

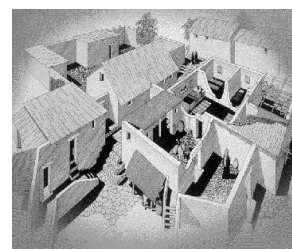


The decorative parts of a house would be *inside*, beginning with the courtyard. Sometimes there would be a awning to cover a portion of it. It was usually planted with flowers, trees, and shrubs (Ps 92:13). Cisterns were another common feature. They would catch rain water which could then be used for cooking or drinking. There is an account in the Bible of such a cistern being used for a hiding place (1 Sam

17:18-19). In cold weather, fires were often built in the courtyards of the houses.

The entrance to the house (courtyard) was often hidden from the street so ordinary passers-by would not have access to it. There would be a large gate and also a smaller door. The smaller door was most frequently used. A passageway (sometimes called the *porch*) leading from the door to the courtyard would be watched by a gate-keeper. It would be the duty of the gate-keeper to recognize the voice of someone wanting to enter the house.

By Jesus' day, houses were a rather complex assortment of rooms, sometimes even including an "upstairs" and "downstairs." Who can



forget the famous *upper room* scenes of the Bible? There was the chamber built for Elisha the prophet (2 Kgs 4:10) and, of course, the room in which Jesus Christ celebrated His last Passover meal with His disciples (Mk 14:12-16; Lk 22:7-13). The meeting of the disciples that preceded the events of Pentecost also took place in an upper room.

Maybe the best-known Bible story involving a house is that which is told in Mark chapter two. Here, some determined men lowered their paralyzed friend down to Jesus by digging through the roof of a house. On seeing what had happened, Christ gave the paralytic the best gift of all—the forgiveness of his sins.

### Conclusion

Houses and references to houses are made throughout the Scriptures. They were a large part of family life in Bible times, providing a place of refuge from the wind and the rain. May all those who live in houses today also live under the protection and guidance of God, remembering the words of Moses: *LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations* (Ps 90:1).

### Resources

*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* by Fred H. Wight  
*Bible Times and Customs* by Tim Gibson