Cities and Towns in Ancient Israel (Bronze and Iron Ages)

Background

Many cities were uncovered in Bronze and Iron Age Israel, the vast majority of which were located on tells - artificial mounds created as a result of gradual human settlement activity. Notably, not every location is suitable for the emergence of a center, even of a local nature, and each site had advantages and disadvantages in relation to factors such as security, water supply, transportation (roads) and the availability of soils. Consequently, only several locations could, in antiquity, provide livelihood for a large population at any given region. This resulted with a repeating pattern in which the centers of many periods were continuously located one on top of the other, thus creating the famous tells which are so typical of the Middle Eastern landscape. Although in many instances extramural neighborhoods were built on the slopes of the tells (and in some rare instances cities were not built on tells), it is only in the later half of the first millennium BCE that the overall pattern changed; by then most tells were abandoned and cities were built practically everywhere. The gradual process of tell abandonment resulted from many factors, including changes in security conditions, increased population and improved technology, but this process lies outside the scope of the present discussion.

Notably, the towns (and tells) of ancient Israel were much smaller than their contemporaries in Mesopotamia and Syria. An average city of the Bronze and Iron Age covered some 3-5 ha (and sometimes even less); larger towns, in the scale of 7-12 ha, were also present. Towns of 20 ha, however, were exceptionally large, and megalopolis of 60 ha and more were extremely rare - very few such sites existed in the periods discussed here (e.g., Hazor in the Middle Bronze Age II and Late Bronze Age, and Jerusalem in the Iron Age II).

Defining a city is a complex enterprise. Within the scope of the preset paper, suffice it to note that the urban centers were much larger and more crowded then their rural contemporaries. Their inhabitants were of diverse backgrounds and occupations, and not all of them were engaged in agriculture. Social stratification is evident in practically all such sites, along with public buildings and royal construction activities (palaces, walls, storehouses, water system, etc.). These urban settlements served as political and economic centers for the villages that surrounded them, and probably also, during most periods, as centers of tax collection and as places of refuge in times of need.

History of Urbanization in Ancient Israel up to the Persian Period

Cities first appeared in ancient Israel around the transition to the third Millennium BCE (Early Bronze Age) (see Extra 1). These first cities usually lie at the bottom of the tells, and in most cases not much is known for certain about their planning. It is mainly in the desert area, where the sites were not resettled in later periods, that we can discuss elements of city planning. 'Arad, in southern Israel, is the best-known example of such sites (Fig. 1).

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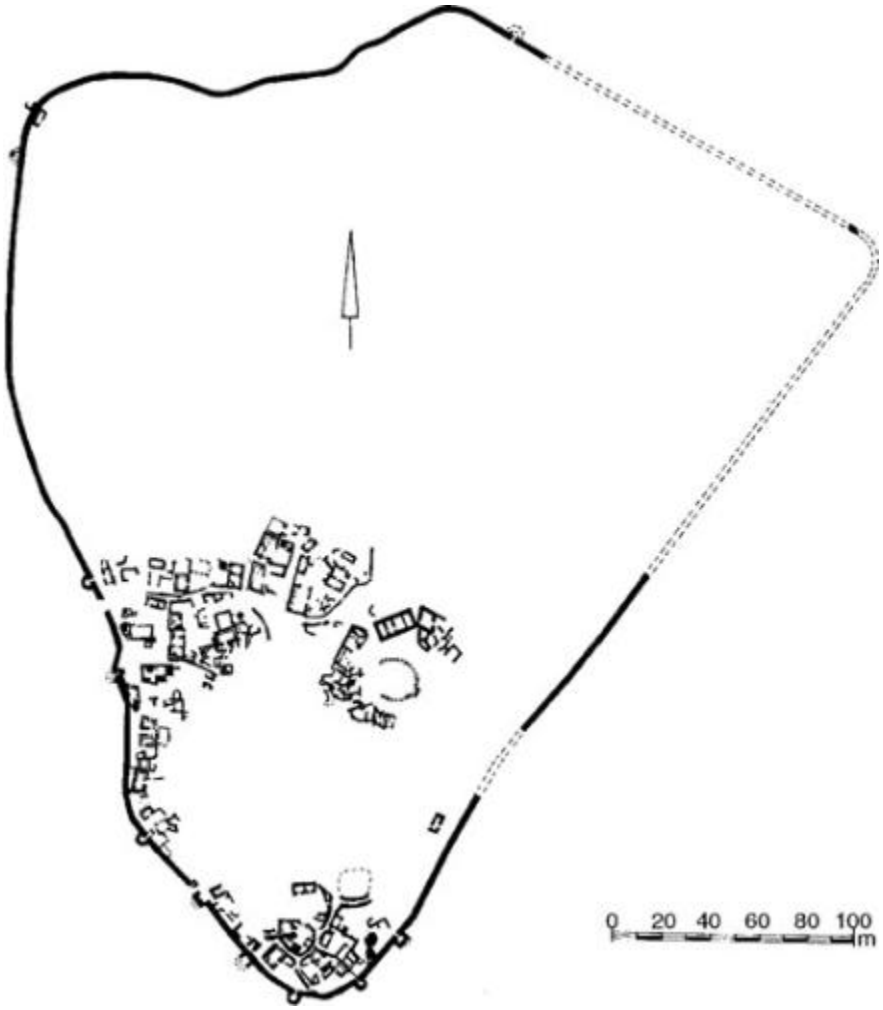

Fig. 1 The Early Bronze Age city of 'Arad (based on Kempinski 1992a: 76; courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society).

The site covers almost 10 ha, and seems to have been divided into several, public and residential, quarters. The former included several small temples and a modest palace. A large, but simple, water system into which rainwater were collected, was unearthed in the lowest part of the city. One should remember, however, that it is not certain whether 'Arad is a representative of the Early Bronze Age urban phenomenon, as, due to its location on the desert fringe, it might have differed from the typical towns of the third millennium BCE.

The Early Bronze cities were gradually destroyed and abandoned toward the end of the millennium, and by the last two centuries of this millennium (the Intermediate Bronze Age) Cisjordan was devoid of any urban settlement.

Urbanization resumed in the twentieth and nineteenth century BCE (Middle Bronze Age II; 2000-1550 BCE). New cities emerged throughout the country, with an emphasis on the lower regions. Port-cities were built for the first time. The largest Middle Bronze Age urban center was Hazor, which was apparently part of the Syrian system of city-states. Many sites were now surrounded with massive earth-works, whose purpose, however, is doubted since in many instances no city wall was unearthed on top of them. Some scholars have suggested that their construction, which required much labor but very few experts, served the local leaders as a substitute for the building of large and impressive city walls, as the latter would have required more experts which were not easily available for most rulers. Some towns show signs of planning, probably following a simple grid (Tell el 'Ajul) (Fig. 2).

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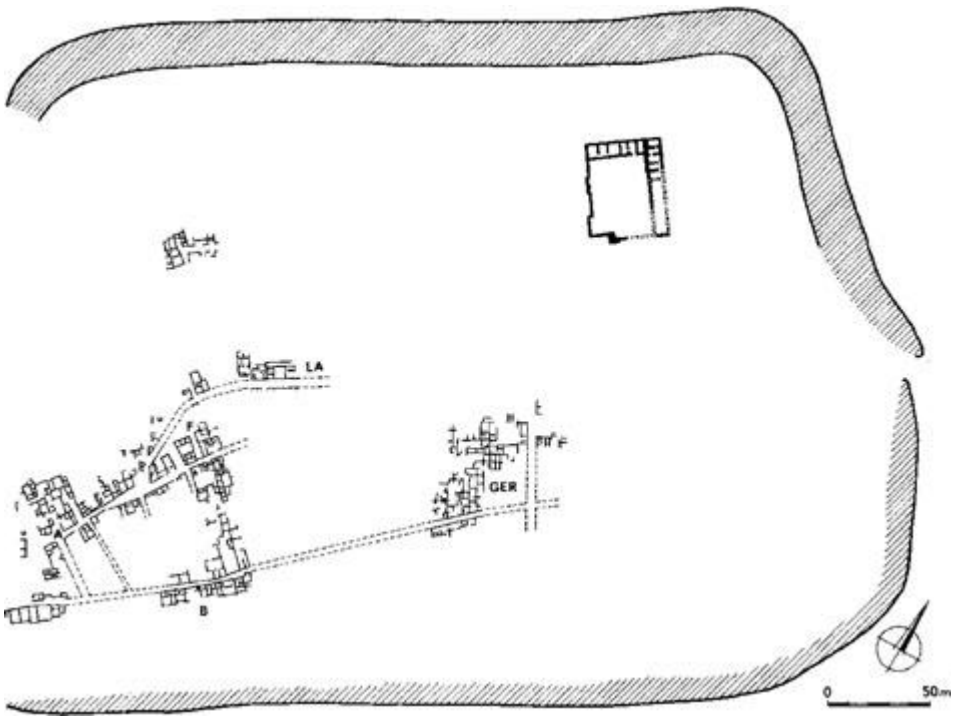

Fig. 2 The Middle Bronze Age II center of Tell el-'Ajul (based on Kempinski 1992b: 124; courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society).

While most characteristics of Middle Bronze Age culture continued during the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BCE), the number of towns declined, and they became smaller in size. Furthermore, hardly any settlement was fortified at the time (since the region was an Egyptian colony, the latter can probably be attributed to Egyptian policy).

Further decline occurred during the Iron Age I (1200-1000). The Egyptian domination over Canaan vanished, and many centers were destroyed or abandoned. Other towns, however, continued to exist, especially in the northern valleys, and a new wave of urbanization took place in the southern Coastal Plain, as a result of the arrival of the Sea Peoples (mainly the Philistines). The latter founded some new cities, for example in Ekron, covering relatively large areas.

Urbanization in many parts of the country was resumed on a larger scale only in tandem with the formation processes of the Israelite state, in the late eleventh and tenth centuries BCE, during the transition to the IAII (1000-586 BCE) (see Extra 2). This urbanization probably involved, partially at least, forced settlement of population in urban centers.

The Iron Age II presents a settlement peak in the history of the region. Many urban centers were erected at the time throughout the country, with an emphasis on the highlands and the northern valleys. Excavations have uncovered various types of cities and a complex settlement hierarchy; from capitals, through administrative and regional centers of different sizes, to small field towns (in addition to rural settlements of course). The largest cities of the period were Samaria and Jerusalem, the capitals of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (respectively). At its height the latter covered some 90-100 ha (including extramural neighborhoods) - larger than any other site in ancient Israel during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Also of significant size were several Philistine centers such as Ekron, Gath and Ashkelon.

Excavations have revealed clear evidence for socioeconomic stratification. Most of the population lived in small houses, which probably housed small nuclear families. The wealthy and some high officials were better off, and lived in large four room houses (see Extra 3). In some settlements a form of a middle class is also identified. Palaces, which were identified in several cities, represent the upper part of the socioeconomic continuum, and this is where the royal family and the highest officials lived.

The Assyrian and (mainly) the Babylonian campaigns brought about large-scale destruction and population decline, and the number and size of towns decline dramatically. Urbanization in the Persian Period was more limited, and concentrated mainly in the Coastal Plain. Real large-scale urbanization re-emerged only in the Hellenistic period.

Iron Age Town-Planning

The Israelite towns of the Iron Age II (1000-586 BCE) have received a great deal of scholarly attention, resulting from the

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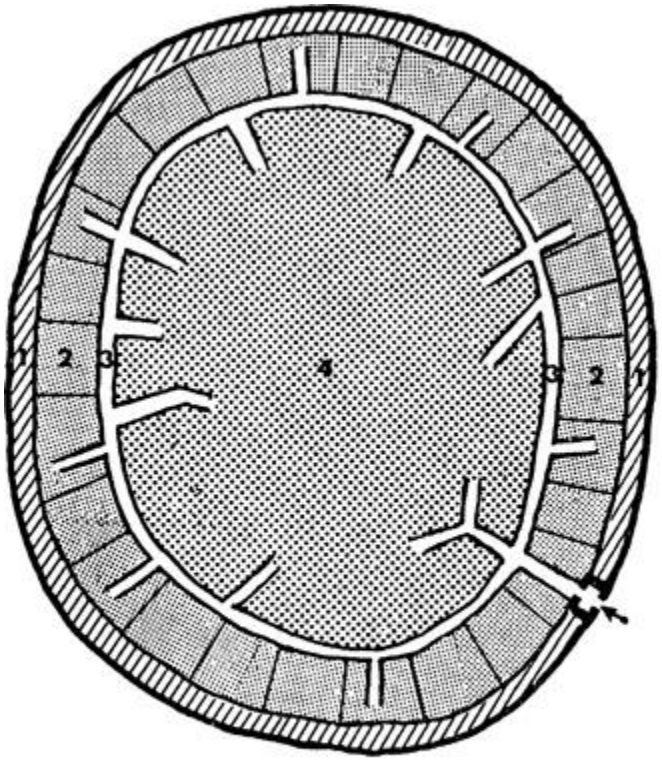
interest of scholars in this part of the biblical period, from its being a demographic peak in which more sites existed than ever before, and because the Iron Age II usually comprises the upper strata on the tells, therefore permitting large scale exposure, impossible for other periods.

According to Yigal Shiloh's seminal study, the basic outline of the Israelite "town plan is clear: alongside the line of fortifications there is a belt of buildings bordered on the inner side by a ring road, running parallel to the fortifications, and separating these structures from the "core" of the city. The "core" itself was divided into many blocks of residential units of the four-room house type and its subtypes" (Shiloh 1978: 37-38) (Fig. 3).



Schematic model of the Israelite city, based on Tell Beit Mirsim, Tell en-Nasbeh, Beth Shemesh and Beer-sheba: 1. fortifications; 2. buildings of the outer belt; 3. ring road; 4. central core.

Fig. 3 A typical Israelite town (according to Shiloh 1978: 41; courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society).

Apparently, the outer belt was intersected by small alleys, separating the various houses, and leading to the city-wall, therefore enabling free access to the wall and to its casemate rooms (when these existed) (Fig. 4).

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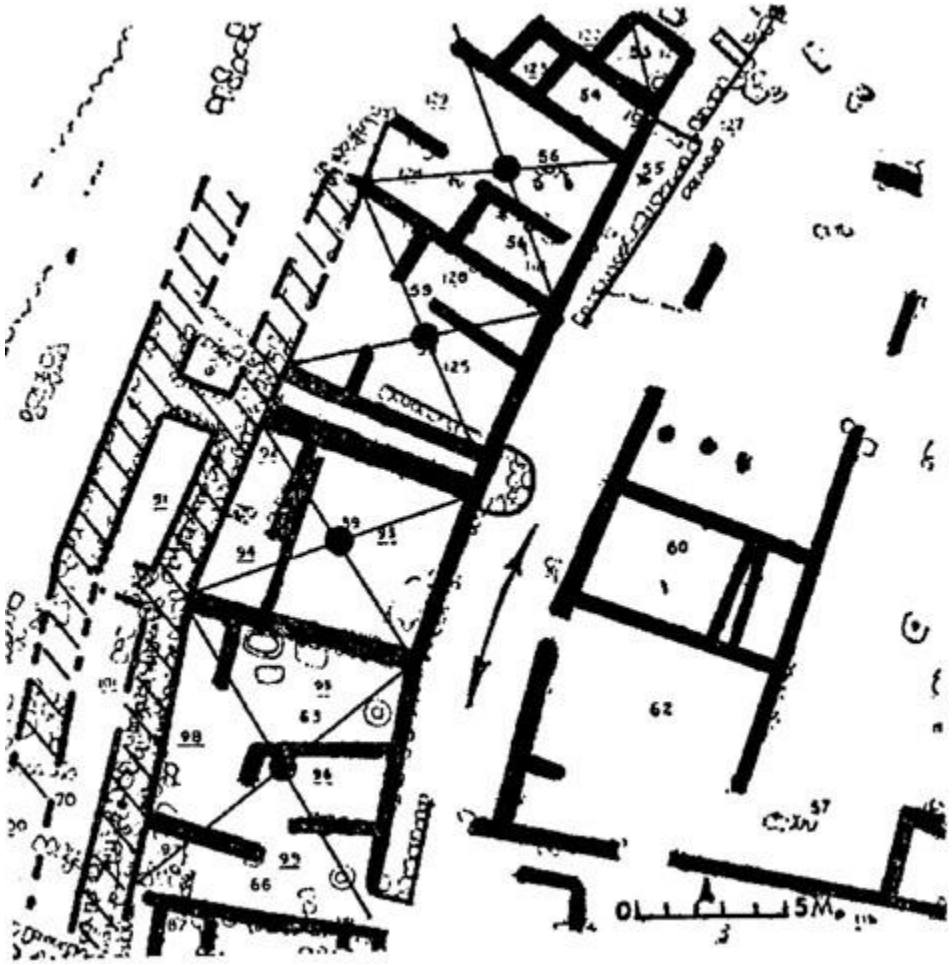

Fig. 4 Part of Beth Shemesh city plan (based on Shiloh 1978: 40; courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society).

While some components of this plan can be found throughout the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, it is more typical of the Kingdom of Judah. In most cities in the kingdom of Israel (and probably also Philistia) a different planning prevailed. Here the city wall was accompanied by a road, and only inside this street were buildings built, divided into quarters by smaller streets.

Accessibility to the city wall seems to have been a major factor in Iron Age town-planning. A besieged city which fell to the enemy suffered a horrible fate, and both types of planning enabled the defenders easy and quick access to the city walls; through the small alleys in the "Judahite" plan, and from practically any place in the "Israelite" plan.

Another difference between Judah and Israel lies in the fact that most towns which were built according to the latter plan were surrounded by a solid wall, while the "Judahite" plan is usually accompanied by a casemate wall. The alleys constructed in Judahite towns enabled the authorities not only access to the top of the wall, but also to some casemates, which could have been used for storage. The principle of accessibility to the city wall was adhered to in both plans, and it is likely that the reason for the adoption of different planning was due to space considerations. Larger cities could afford a massive wall, and a street that run along it. Smaller towns, in which space was scarce, tried to save as much area as possible; casemate walls were therefore built, and the ring-road was located inside the outer belt of houses (therefore reducing the space it consumed).

Another characteristics of the Iron Age city was a public quarter near the city gate. The impressive gate was usually accompanied by an open square, and near or around it were public structures, palaces, storehouses, barracks, water-systems, etc., as can be seen Beersheba, Tell en-Nasbeh, Beth-Shemesh, Jerusalem, Kinrot, Gezer, etc (see Extra 4).

Furthermore, cosmological principles had also an influence on Israelite construction on all levels, from dwellings to cities. It seems that as part of their complex cosmology the Israelites regarded the east as the most auspicious direction, and the west as the most inauspicious one (like many other societies). Accordingly, they directed their structures in an

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easterly orientation whenever this was possible, and when this was not the case, they, at least, attempted to avoid the west. This was manifested also in city gates, and about 75% of those faced, roughly, the east. Following easterly orientation for dwellings in towns was difficult, and was carried out in the following manner (1) public buildings were adjacent to most of the Iron II city gates; (2) most city gates were oriented to the east.

The result was that no dwellings were built in the eastern part of the outer belt, and no dwellings in this belt were expected to face the west, therefore avoiding this inauspicious orientation. The same principle was followed also inside the ring-road, as in many cases houses were oriented toward small alleys (and avoided the main street when it was to their west).

The eastern orientation seems, therefore, to have been a major principle of town-planning, influencing not only the orientation of city-gates, but also of many dwellings and alleys.

The town of Beersheba can serve as a good example of a planned settlement in the Iron Age (Fig. 5).

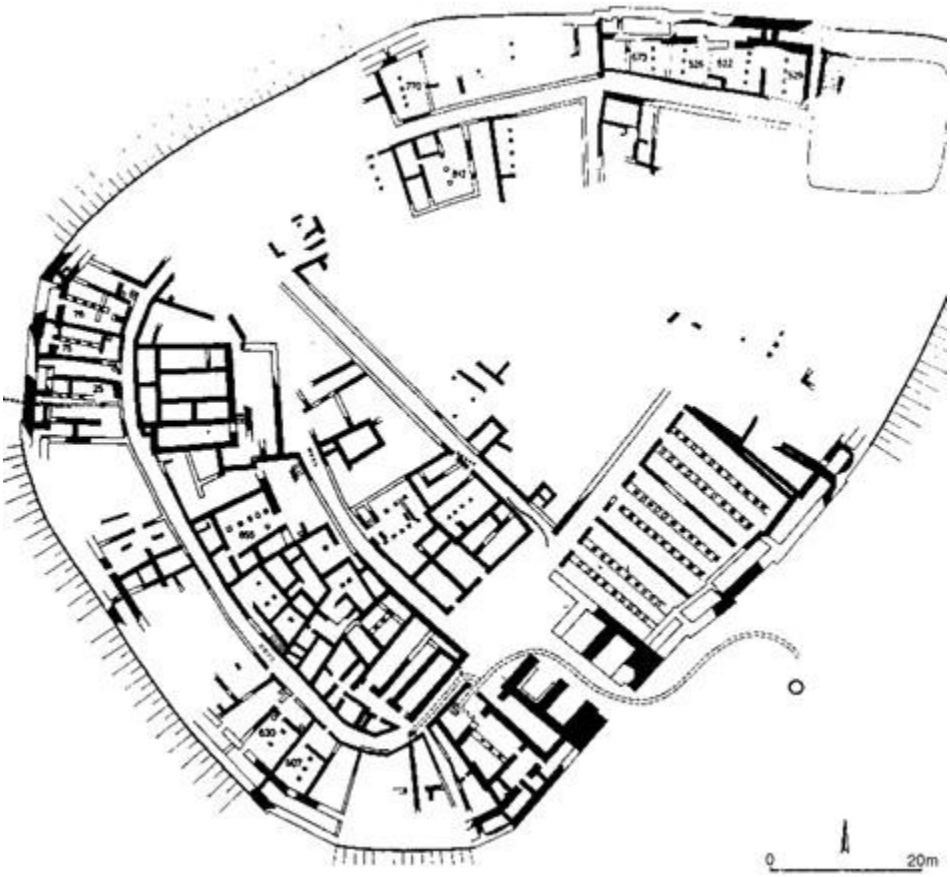

Fig. 5 General plan of Beer-Sheba (Singer-Avitz 1996: 168; courtesy of Prof. Ze'ev Herzog, Tel Aviv University).

During the eighth century BCE Beersheba (stratum II) was a small but well-planned administrative center in the Negev. Its gate was in the southeastern part of the wall, facing this direction. Inside the gate, a small square was located, surrounded by pubic buildings of various sorts. The city wall was accompanied with a belt of houses, which used its casemates as their backrooms, and with a nicely built inner ring road that gave access to these houses. The outer belt of houses was intersected in various points by small corridors that connected the ring-road with the casemate walls, enabling easy access to the wall, and to some of its casemates. The inner part of the town - its core - was divided by smaller streets which cut through it, dividing it into blocks of houses.

The eastern part of the outer belt of houses was composed by public buildings, and did not include any dwellings. The dwellings in this belt, therefore, were oriented to the south, east and north, but not to the west. Houses in the inner blocks were oriented toward the inner streets, usually avoiding the west. Adhering to the eastern orientation caused them, in some instances, to orient their backs to the main street, and to face small alleys.

Extra 1

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Notably, the emergence of towns was a long process, and it is not always easy to identify the exact point in time from which a settlement should be called a city. Some settlements were quite large and complex already in the last phase of the fourth millennium BCE (Early Bronze Age I, traditionally regarded as a "proto-urban" period), and some have suggested that these were the first cities. Other scholars, however, had questioned the validity of the term "urban" not only for the centers of the third millennium BCE, but even to these of the later phases of the Bronze Age, suggesting that they were just complex villages. Most scholars, however, accept the traditional view, and regard these large settlements as cities.

Extra 2

The late eleventh and early tenth centuries witnessed the gradual disappearance of rural settlements in most parts of ancient Israel. It is suggested that at least part of this process resulted from a policy of "forced settlement." The newly established Israelite monarchy transferred some of the population (especially in the newly conquered territories) to other/new settlements, and mainly to cities, in order to facilitate better control of the population, to lower costs, and to minimize the efforts involved in delivering sanctions, be it normative, remunerative or coercive, while maximizing its effectiveness.

Extra 3

The term "four-room house" is a convention used to designate the typical Iron Age dwelling in ancient Israel whose ideal plan is composed of four main rooms. The "typical" house includes three parallel longitudinal spaces that are backed by a broad-room, with the entrance located at the central longitudinal space. The "rooms" are really spaces/areas and can be subdivided. There are subtypes of the "ideal" form, comprising three or two "spaces" and, in exceptional cases, even five "spaces." The high popularity of the four-room house was explained as either expressing its close relation with the Israelites (without elaborating the reasons for this relation) and/or its functional suitability to the needs of the Iron Age peasants, regardless of their ethnicity. Neither of these explanations, however, seem to account for the synchronic and diachronic dominance of the four-room house as a preferable architectural type in all levels of Iron Age settlement (from cities to hamlets; private dwellings and public buildings), all over the country (both in highlands and lowlands), for almost 600 years(!). It is likely that an adequate explanation for the unique phenomenon of the four-room house must relate to the ideological/cognitive realm, and to its place within the Israelite social and spiritual worlds.

Extra 4

A typical public building in Iron Age towns is the "tripartite pillared building" (see Fig. 5, to the north of the gate). Such structures were discovered in many cities (especially near the city gate), but their interpretation varies greatly: the most common interpretation is that of a stable or a storehouse. In most instances, however, large quantities of "domestic" pottery (mainly bowls, jugs, juglets, cooking pots, and also storage jars) were found on the floors of these buildings. Since the finds do not easily fit with the above interpretations, some scholars have raised additional possibilities, including barracks, covered markets, customhouse, and a multipurpose public building which had many functions, including a shelter for the poor.

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