

HEBREW BIBLE

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

THE SANCTUARY OF BEER-SHEBA

by

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After six seasons of excavations at Tel Beer-sheba, the site of biblical Beer-sheba, the history of this important city and the tradition of its venerated sanctuary can be described with much confidence. In this article it is my intention to present these conclusions to the non-archaeological reader.¹

Settlement on the hill started in an early stage of the Israelite period, during the 13th or 12th century B. C. E., and in contradiction to the expectation of most scholars nothing earlier has been found.² This is true not only for the *tel* itself but for the whole vicinity. In the Beer Sheva basin (this is the spelling of the modern Hebrew name as against the accepted biblical spelling of the name – Beer-sheba) no remains preceding the Israelite period have been discovered, except of course the Chalcolithic settlements which go back to the 4th millennium B. C. E. The nearest Middle Bronze Age sites are Tel Masos (Khirbet el-Meshâsh) 12 km. east of Beer-sheba and Tel Haror (Tell Abu Hureireh) ca. 30 km. to the west. It seems hardly probable that this picture will be changed by future discoveries after all the excavations and surveys carried out in the area. That means that the Patriarchal stories connected with Beer-sheba originated only during the period of the Israelite settlement.³ It is not my intention here to dwell on the question of the date of the Patriarchal traditions which evidently contain earlier motives. However, their connection with Beer-sheba cannot be earlier. It goes together with the founding of the cult place at the site with which all the three Patriarchs are associated (Genesis 21; 26; 46).

¹ The excavations are carried out by the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology as an educational project with all the labour done only by students and volunteers. The results of the first three seasons have been published in *Beer-sheba I*, edited by Y. Aharoni, Tel Aviv, 1973. Preliminary reports on the later seasons are published in *Tel Aviv*, Journal of the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology.

² Not taking into consideration traces of a Chalcolithic settlement of the 4th millennium B. C. E. which are to be found at many sites in the Beer-sheba area.

³ This stands in agreement with the assumption of Prof. B. Mazar that the historical background of the Book of Genesis belongs to the 12th-11th centuries; see *JNES* 28 (1969), pp. 73-83.

It seems that the settlement on the hill started with the founding of the cult place. Most of the civilian population of Beer-sheba always lived not on the *tel* but farther down near the river-bed, beside which the wells are to be found. The main village evidently was at the site of the old city of modern Beer Sheva, 4.5 km. west of the *tel*, next to a concentration of wells. This is the area of the Roman city and wherever excavations have been carried out here Iron Age remains have also been struck, part of them going back to the Early Israelite period.

Not only that village but also the early settlement on the *tel* had no fortifications. This is the case with all pre-monarchical sites in the eastern Negev, all of which were unwallled villages.⁴ Tel Beer-sheba is an outstanding hill dominating the region. It is situated between the two large, dry river-beds, Nachal Beer Sheva and Nachal Hevron, which join to the west of the *tel*. Thus it is an ideal site for a fortress; but being high off the road, distant from the water sources and exposed to the strong desert winds it is not an attractive place for a civilian settlement. We have, therefore, every reason to believe that the settlement at the site started with the cult place founded at that prominent spot visible from far away.

The ancient cult place is connected with a well of special importance, which according to the biblical tradition was dug by the Patriarchs (Gen. 21:25-33; 26:25). May we assume that the cult place with its tamarisk tree (Gen. 21:33) and altar (Gen. 25:25; 46:1) was on the high hill and the well was somewhere down near the river-bed? This problem was solved with the discovery of a unique well dug on the summit of the *tel*. The nearest spot to the river was chosen and it was here that they managed to hit the underground water level near the river-bed. Our excavations penetrated as far as 20m. into the well, which may be about half of its depth. The well was in use until the early Roman period, according to the pottery found in it. However, the structures from the early Israelite period found around the well made it clear that it was dug in that period. This surprising effort by the settlers of an unfortified village to dig such a deep well on the high hill was apparently connected with the cult place. Since this was founded on the dominating hill and a settlement grew around it, the daily water provision became a matter of utmost importance. No wonder that this remarkable and unique well was soon connected with traditions of the most remote antiquity. It is true that the ancient cult place itself has not yet been discovered but, as we shall see, we have proof of the continuation of worship on the *tel* in the period of the First Temple and later.

The early village was destroyed in about 1,000 B. C. E. and thereafter starts a new chapter in the history of Beer-sheba. It is interesting that

⁴ See Y. Aharoni, The Second Season at Tel Masos, Historical Conclusions, *Tel Aviv* 2 (1975) – in print.

this is true for the whole Israelite Negev. All Israelite settlements excavated so far were destroyed in that period and their place was taken by fortresses and fortified cities in the period of the monarchy. This crisis obviously occurred in the days of Saul and the early days of David during the encounters with the Philistines and the Amalekites.

The 10th century stratum at Beer-sheba is the first fortified city at the place. Its size was only about 10 dunams, which is a small city in comparison with other sites. However, we must remember that this was only the royal, fortified city, and the much larger civilian settlement remained at its location in the lowland.

The city was surrounded by a solid wall with insets and offsets, 3-4 m. thick. This wall was set on an artificial rampart, 7-8 m. high, made of various levels of soil and gravel and covered by a steep glacis. Evidently, the intention was to level the summit of the natural hill and raise its defences, yet this unusually large labour emphasises the importance of the city. The gate was at the south-eastern side, near the ancient wall. It consisted of a large inner gate-tower with two gate rooms on both sides of the passage and a small outer gate, connected to the inner gate by a broad wall. The well was now just outside the outer gate, similar to "the well of Bethlehem which was by the gate" (2 Samuel 23:14) in the days of David. Another major water system was discovered in the northern part of the city inside the city walls. Only its corner with a broad, encircling staircase was excavated, which is similar to the large water systems of Megiddo and Hazor.

A well-cut round incense altar of stone was found in the debris beside the entrance to the inner gate. At Dan a raised podium surrounded by decorated pillars was found at about the same place.⁵ These installations apparently belong to the "high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate" (2 Kings 23:8) mentioned in the days of Josiah. This is not the only similarity between the gates of Dan and Beer-sheba. Their plan is almost identical and they are different from the Solomonic gates which were discovered at Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer (cf. 1 Ki. 9:15).⁶ This makes it probable that Beer-sheba was already rebuilt and fortified during the days of David. It was apparently David who fortified the borders of the kingdom, and the classical border definition of the kingdom "from Dan to Beer-sheba" actually appears in his time, in an administrative text, i. e. the census of the Israelite population (2 Sam. 24:2, 6-7). This fact also explains the list of cities fortified by Solomon (1 Ki. 9:15ff.) which were not on the borders but mainly at strategic road junctions inside the country.⁷

⁵ A. Biran, *Qadmoniot* 4 (1971), pp. 6-9 (Hebrew).

⁶ Y. Yadin, *Solomon's City Wall and Gate at Gezer*, *IEJ* 8 (1958), pp. 80-86.

⁷ Y. Aharoni, *The Building Activities of David and Solomon*, *IEJ* 24 (1974) pp.

Not less surprising than the fortifications is the discovery that the city was built according to a preconceived overall plan. This is clear from the great public buildings, the regular quarters and the straight and well-planned streets. It is true that the excavated city plan belongs mainly to the latest phase of the Israelite city, i. e. the days of Hezekiah. However, wherever the earlier strata were exposed, they exhibited the same outline of buildings and the same line of streets with only minor changes. The 8th century plan basically represents, therefore, the royal store city as it was laid out in the days of David.

The dominant feature of the city plan was a circular street, starting from the gate and encircling the entire city, with rows of buildings on both sides. The later city was surrounded by a casemate wall (two parallel walls with rooms in between) which took the place of the solid wall during the 9th and 8th centuries. The external houses leaned against the city wall, and the casemate rooms served as units of the buildings. Changes carried out in the openings of the city wall in connection with the houses show the close relationship between them. Evidently most of the city dwellers were royal functionaries in various capacities.

Outstanding among the public buildings were the royal stores situated to the right of the city wall and entered from the circular street. They constitute a complex of three adjoining buildings, identical in plan. Each has three long halls divided by two rows of stone pillars with shelves or compartments between them. Hundreds of various storage vessels were found on the stone pavement of the external halls, mainly for the storage of cereals, wine and oil in accordance with the biblical description (2 Chron. 11: 11; 31:5 etc.) and the Arad ostraca.⁸ The inner halls have a slightly raised mud floor and they were used as passages and working space. Some of the pillars have holes at their corners facing the inner hall to which pack animals were probably fastened during the loading and preparing of the provisions. These stores are virtually identical in plan and most details with the so-called Megiddo "stables". It thus becomes increasingly likely that they too were stores, a suggestion first advanced by J. B. Pritchard.⁹ This does not mean that there were no horses kept in these store cities, but they were apparently kept in more provisional shelters.

The description of the stores brings us back to the question of the sanctuary. In a repaired section of the storehouse complex the re-used ash-

⁸ The volume of *The Arad Inscriptions* is now in print and will be published by Mosad Bialik (in Hebrew). Until its publication, see Y. Aharoni, *Arad: Its Inscriptions and Temple*, BA 31 (1968), pp. 1-32; *idem.* Hebrew Ostraca from Tel Arad, *IEJ* 16 (1966), pp. 1-7; *idem.* Three Hebrew Ostraca from Arad, *BASOR* 197 (1970), pp. 16-42.

⁹ J. B. Pritchard, *The Megiddo Stables: A Reassessment*, *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck, ed. J. A. Sanders, New York, 1970, pp. 268-276.

lar blocks of a large *horned altar* were discovered. Four stones carved in the form of horns were found arranged one beside the other in the wall of the store, three intact and the fourth broken. Additional similar worked ashlar stones of a special calcareous sandstone were found above them and in some other sections. The shape of the horns is reminiscent of small incense altars from the period of the monarchy known from several places, but the size of the Beer-sheba altar leaves no doubt that these are the remnants of a horned altar for burnt offering. The only comparable altar has been discovered in the courtyard of the Israelite temple at Arad, but there no traces of horns have been preserved.¹⁰

The discovery of the altar makes it most probable that a temple was erected at Beer-sheba in the period of the monarchy at the ancient cult place, exactly as was the case at Arad. This temple evidently roused the wrath of Amos, who denounced the worship at Beer-sheba and compared it with the temples at Dan and Bethel (Amos 5:5; 8:14). The stones of the altar are well-smoothed ashlar masonry, which seems to stand in contradiction to the biblical law that altar should be built of "unhewn stones, upon which no man has lifted an iron tool" (Joshua 8.31 etc.). This law apparently was disregarded at Beer-sheba; alternatively we could suppose that the law was taken literally and the dressing was done with tools of bronze or stone instead of the common iron. One stone has a deeply engraved decoration of a twisting snake, an ancient symbol of fertility widely dispersed throughout the Near East. The symbol of a snake was venerated in Israel from Moses's time (Num. 21: 8-9) and the bronze serpent was worshipped in the Jerusalem temple until the days of Hezekiah (2 Ki. 18:4).

It seems that the same apparently happened at Beer-sheba. To our surprise the city on the *tel* did not endure until the end of the First Temple period, but was destroyed and abandoned about a century earlier. This is clear from the complete absence of typical 7th century pottery, which appears on the other Negev *tels* like Arad, Tel Malchata and Tel Masos and has also been found in the civilian settlement below the *tel* at Beer-sheba itself. Beer-sheba was, therefore, one of the 46 cities destroyed by Sennacherib according to his own inscription, and it becomes more and more obvious that this statement must be taken seriously.

The stores together with the city were thus destroyed in the days of Hezekiah, and the repaired section of the store probably belongs to the building activities of this king. We may therefore assume with much confidence that it was Hezekiah who ordered the dismantling of the altar and the re-use of its stones in a profane building. This is a most dramatic corroboration of the religious reform carried out by that king, as expressed in the harsh accusations of Rabshakeh before the walls of Jerusalem: "But if you

¹⁰ See BA 31 (1968), pp. 157-169.

say to me, 'We rely on the Lord our God', is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem'? (2 Ki. 18:22).

Not only the altar but most probably one of the "high places" destroyed by Hezekiah was the temple of Beer-sheba. An unusually large building was found at the summit of the *tel* facing the west. The central street led straight from the gate towards this building, which must have been of special importance. We now call it the "basement building", because of a very special feature. This building belongs to the last phase of the city and before its construction all the previous structures at this spot were completely dismantled and the new building was founded on bed-rock. Not only that, but the whole area was excavated and the building now stood about 4 m. deeper than the surrounding terrain. Some of its rooms were, therefore, left open as basements whose walls still stand about 4 m. high, and the other rooms were filled up to the level of the surrounding terrain. Such a complete "excavation" of earlier structures is different from all other excavated buildings and it has no parallel in excavations, in any case not from that period.

Is our assumption that at this spot stood the ancient temple, which was completely dismantled by Hezekiah together with its altar, too far-fetched? This assumption is strengthened by several additional considerations:

a) The size of the dismantled area is about identical with the size of the Arad temple and its courtyard.

b) This is one of the few buildings of the city which stands in a perfect east-west direction. This is the direction of the Arad temple and also that of the Jerusalem temple and the description of the Tabernacle.

c) A 1.2 m. high subterranean passage leads from outside the city wall towards the centre of the building. Its usage is unknown to us, but this is again exactly the case at Arad where a subterranean passage leads to the room beside the Holy of Holies.

d) Just beside the "basement building" and actually touching its walls, a temple from the Hellenistic period was discovered. The temple itself is a distinct "broad room" structure, similar even in size to the Arad temple, entered from its long eastern side. It is preceded by a large courtyard with a 2 m. square stone platform in its centre; evidently the base of an altar for burnt offering. Along the walls of the courtyard a row of ovens was found, apparently serving the worshippers or priests. A large group of votive and cult objects was discovered in several pits (*favissae*) in the courtyard and in the vicinity of the temple. They contained, besides decorated incense altars of stone, faience bowls, amulets and beads, a rich assemblage of figurines and other votive objects. These are of a most heterogeneous origin: many of them are Egyptian figurines of bronze, bone and faience, but others are Phoenician, like the glass head of a male figurine, and others are Mesopotamian, such as a decorated cylinder seal with a cuneiform inscription.

The Hellenistic temple evidently inherited the old cult place, though its nature was already completely pagan and cosmopolitan. This another striking example of the preservation of cult traditions even with the change of population and culture. Interestingly enough the plan of the temple has nothing to do with Hellenistic architecture, but it preserved the old Semitic plan, now well known from Arad and Lachish.¹¹

Though the excavations are still in progress and the picture is not yet complete, several basic facts regarding the history of the Beer-sheba sanctuary seem to be clear:

a) The sanctuary was founded on the prominent hill during the period of the settlement, approximately in the 13th or 12th century B. C. E. It was connected with a unique well, which is mentioned in the biblical tradition, and an unfortified village grew around it.

b) In the period of the monarchy a temple was erected at the most prominent site inside the well-planned, fortified city. Various particularities point to its similarity with the contemporaneous temple at Arad and the preserved horned altar indicates its superior execution.

c) The temple was completely dismantled and abolished before the destruction of the city by Sennacherib, i. e. evidently by Hezekiah in connection with his religious reforms.

d) Though the city was never rebuilt after its destruction in 701 B. C. E., the tradition of the cult place was preserved by the local population. This is clear from the pagan temple which was erected at the site in the Hellenistic period beside a fortress on the summit of the *tel*. The plan of that last temple still preserves the old traditional architecture.

These conclusions should be taken into consideration in any future research regarding the tradition of Israelite worship and the development of Israelite cult and religion.

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¹¹ For Lachish, see Y. Aharoni, Trial Excavation in the 'Solar Shrine' at Lachish, *IEJ* 18 (1968), pp. 157-169.