

Beersheba

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Beer'-sheba (Heb. *Beer' She'ba*, בְּאֵר שָׁבַע, in pause *Beer' Sha'ba*, בְּאֵר שָׁבַע, *well of swearing*, or *well of seven*; Sept. in Genesis Φρέαρ τοῦ ὀρκισμοῦ or τοῦ ὄρκου; in Joshua and later books, Βηρσαβέε; Josephus, *Ant.* 1, 12, 1, Βηρσουβαί, which he immediately interprets by ὄρκιον φρέαρ), the name of one of the oldest places in Palestine, and which formed the southern limit of the country. There are two accounts of the origin of the name. According to the first, the well was dug by Abraham, and the name given, because there he and Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, "sware" (נִשְׁבַּע) both of them ([Ge 21:31](#)). But the compact was ratified by the setting apart of "seven ewe lambs;" and as the Hebrew word for "seven" is שָׁבַע, *Sheba*, it is equally possible that this is the meaning of the name. The other narrative ascribes the origin of the name to an occurrence almost precisely similar, in which both Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, and Phichol, his chief captain, are again concerned, with the difference that the person on the Hebrew side of the transaction is Isaac instead of Abraham ([Ge 26:31-33](#)). Here there is no reference to the "seven" lambs, and we are left to infer the derivation of *Shibeah* (שִׁבְעָה, *Shibah'*, not "Shebah," as in the Auth. Vers.) from the mention of the "swearing" (יִשְׁבַּע) in ver. 31. These two accounts, however, appear to be adjusted by the statement in ver. 18 that this was one of the wells originally dug by Abraham, to which Isaac, on reopening them, assigned the same names given them by his

father.

Beersheba appears to have been a favorite abode of both these patriarchs. After the digging of the well Abraham planted a "grove" (אֶשְׁלָל) as a place for the worship of Jehovah, such as constituted the temples of those early times; and here he lived until the sacrifice of Isaac, and for a long time afterward (Ge 21:33-22:1; Ge 22:19). This seems to imply the growth of the place into a considerable town. Here also Isaac was dwelling at the time of the transference of the birthright from Esau to Jacob (Ge 26:33; Ge 28:10), and from the patriarchal encampment round the wells of his grandfather Jacob set forth on the journey to Mesopotamia which changed the course of his whole life. Jacob does not appear to have revisited the place until he made it one of the stages of his journey down to Egypt. He then halted there to offer sacrifice to "the God of his father," doubtless under the 'sacred grove of Abraham. From this time till the conquest of the country we only catch a momentary glimpse of Beersheba in the lists of the "cities" in the extreme south of Judah (Ge 15:21) given to the tribe of Simeon (Ge 19:2; 1Ch 4:28). Samuel's sons were appointed deputy judges for the southernmost districts in Beersheba (1Sa 8:2), its distance no doubt precluding its being among the number of the "holy cities" (Sept.), to which he himself went in circuit every year (7:16). By the times of the monarchy it had become recognised as the most southerly place of the country. Its position, as the place of arrival and departure for the caravans trading between Palestine and the countries lying in that direction, would naturally lead to the formation of a town round the wells of the patriarchs, and the great Egyptian trade begun by Solomon must have increased its importance. Hither Joab's census extended (2Sa 24:7; 1Ch 21:2), and here Elijah bade farewell to his confidential servant (מִשְׁרָת) before taking his journey across the desert to Sinai

(1Ki 19:3). From Dan to Beersheba (Jg 20:1, etc.), or from Beersheba to Dan (1Ch 21:2; comp. 2Sa 24:2), now became the established formula for the whole of the Promised Land; just as "from Geba to Beersheba" (2Ki 23:8), or "from Beersheba to Mount Ephraim" (2Ch 19:4), was that for the southern kingdom after the disruption. After the return from the captivity the formula is narrowed still more, and becomes "from Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom" (Ne 11:30). One of the wives of Ahaziah, king of Judah, Zibiah, mother of Joash, was a native of Beersheba (2Ki 12:1; 2Ch 24:1). From the incidental references of Amos, we find that, like Bethel and Gilgal, the place was, in the time of Uzziah, the seat of an idolatrous worship, apparently connected in some intimate manner with the northern kingdom (Am 5:5; Am 8:14). But the allusions are so slight that nothing can be gathered from them, except that, in the latter of the two passages quoted above, we have perhaps preserved a form of words or an adjuration used by the worshippers, "Live the 'way' of Beersheba!" After this, with the mere mention that Beersheba and the villages round it ("daughters") were reinhabited after the captivity (Ne 11:30), the name dies entirely out of the Bible records. In the New Testament it is not once mentioned; nor is it referred to as then existing by any writer earlier than Eusebius and Jerome, in the fourth century, who describe it as a large village (*Onomast.* κώμη μεγίστη, *vicus grandis*), and the seat of a Roman garrison. The latter else. where (*Quaest. ad Genesis* 17, 30) calls it a "town" (*oppidum*). In the centuries before and after the Moslem conquest it is mentioned among the episcopal cities of Palestine (Reland, *Palaest.* p. 620), but none of its bishops are anywhere named. The site seems to have been almost forgotten (see De Vitriaco, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, p. 1070) till the fourteenth century, when Sir John Maundeville, Rudolf de

Suchem, and William de Baldensel recognised the name at a place which they passed on their route from Sinai to Hebron. It was then uninhabited, but some of the churches were still standing. From that time till the recent visit of Dr. Robinson the place remained unvisited and unknown, except for the slight notice obtained by Seetzen from the Arabs (Zach's *Monatl. Corresp.* 17, 143). Dr. Robinson gives a clear idea of the southernmost district of Palestine, in which is Beersheba, and with which the book of Genesis has connected so many interesting associations. Coming from the south, he emerged from the desert by a long and gradual ascent over swelling hills scantily covered with grass. The summit of this ascent afforded a view over a broad barren tract, bounded on the horizon by the mountains of Judah south of Hebron: "We now felt that the desert was at an end. Descending gradually, we came out upon an open undulating country; the shrubs ceased, or nearly so; green grass was seen along the lesser water-courses, and almost greensward; while the gentle hills, covered in ordinary seasons with grass and rich pasture, were now burnt over with drought. In three quarters of an hour we reached Wady es-Seba, a wide water-course or bed of a torrent, running here W.S.W., upon whose northern side, close upon the bank, are two deep wells, still called *Bir es-Seba*, the ancient Beersheba. We had entered the borders of Palestine!" (*Researches*, 1, 301). There are at present on the spot two principal wells, and five smaller ones. The former, apparently the only, ones seen by Robinson, lie just a hundred yards apart, and are so placed as to be visible from a considerable distance (Bonar, *Land of Prom.* p. 1). The larger of the two, which lies to the east, is, according to the careful measurements of Dr. Robinson, 12½ feet diam., and at the time of his visit (Apr. 12) was 44a feet to the surface of the water; the masonry which encloses the well reaches

downward for 28.5 feet. The other well is 5 feet diam., and was 42 feet to the water. The curb-stones round the mouth of both wells are worn into deep grooves by the action of the ropes of so many centuries, and "look as if frilled or fluted all round." Round the larger well there are nine, and round the smaller five large stone troughs, some much worn and broken, others nearly entire, lying at a distance of 10 or 12 feet from the edge of the well. There were formerly ten of these troughs at the larger well. The circle around is carpeted with a sward of fine short grass, with crocuses and lilies (Bonar, p. 5, 6, 7). The water is excellent, the best, as Dr. Robinson emphatically records, which he had tasted since leaving Sinai. The five lesser wells, apparently the only ones seen by Van de Velde, are, according to his account and the casual notice of Bonar, in a group in the bed of the wady, not on its north bank, and at a great distance from the other two. No ruins are at first visible; but, on examination, foundations of former dwellings have been traced, dispersed loosely over the low hills, to the north of the wells, and in the hollows between. They seem to have been built chiefly of round stones, although some of the stones are squared and some hewn, suggesting the idea of a small straggling city. There are no trees or shrubs near the spot. The site of the wells is nearly midway between the southern end of the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean at Raphaea, or twenty-seven miles south-east from Gaza, and about the same distance south by west from Hebron (20 Roman miles in the *Onomast.*; comp. Josephus, *Ant.* 8, 13, 7). Its present Arabic name, *Bir es-Seba*, means 'well of the seven,' which some take to be the signification also of Beersheba, in allusion to the seven ewe-lambs which Abraham gave to Abimelech in token of the oath between them. There is no ground for rendering it by "*seven wells*," as some have done. *SEE SHEBAH.*