

## מקום ושמו באר-שבע

### אבנר רמז

A place named **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) - “**Beer-sheba**” is mentioned in eleven books of the Bible (Genesis, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1& 2 Kings, Amos, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles). While the meaning of the first word of this name: **באר** (*beer*) is clearly a “well” the exact meaning of the second one: **שבע** (*sheva*) is not certain.

Prior to Eusebius’ Onomasticon (260-339 AD) there is no extra-biblical mention of **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*). Therefore, to determine the location of this place we have to rely exclusively on our reading of the Bible.

The entries about “**Beer-sheba**” in the Books of Nehemiah and Chronicles appear as copies of verses that are found in other biblical books.

Except for the Book of Genesis and one verse of the Book of Amos (5:5), the Greeks translated persistently **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) as “*Bersabee*.”

In the book of Genesis (Gen 21:14, 31, 32, 33; 22:19; 26:23, 33; 28:10; 46:5) and in Amos 5:5 the Greeks translated **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) as “well of oath (or adjuration).”



**Pieter Lastman (1583 -1633). Hagar and the Angel. Holland, 1614.**

We first hear about: **מדבר באר שבע** - “the wilderness of Beer-sheba” (Gen 21:14) as the place where Hagar and her son Ishmael strayed without water after being cast out from Abraham’s house. After God had opened her eyes, Hagar saw a well of water (Gen 21:19). Although located in “the wilderness of Beer-sheba” this well is not named in the Bible. Furthermore, the Book of Genesis does not tell us where exactly “the wilderness of Beer-sheba” is.

In the same chapter we hear about a well of water which King Abimelech’s servants took away from Abraham, who claims that he dug it (Gen 21:22-30). At that time Abraham was in:

**ויגר בגרר וישב בין-קדש ובין שור; ויגר בגרר** - “and [he] dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar” (Gen 20:1). After the well was returned to Abraham:

**קרא למקום ההוא--באר שבע: כי שם נשבעו שניהם. ויכרתו ברית בבאר שבע;**

“Wherefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there they swore both of them. So they made a covenant at Beer-sheba” (Gen 21:31-32).

It seems that the place named by Abraham **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*), was in Gerar and that it was not associated with the previous well in **מדבר באר שבע** - “the wilderness of Beer-sheba.”

After the event in the “Land of Moriah” we read that:

**וישב אברהם אל-נעריו, ויקמו וילכו יחדו אל-באר שבע; וישב אברהם בבאר שבע.**  
“So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba” (Gen 22:19).

However, we have to wonder whether this was **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) of Gerar or was it **מדבר באר שבע** - “the wilderness of Beer-sheba.”

When the famine forced Isaac to relocate (from “Beer-lahai-roi”?) to Gerar (Gen 26:1) he soon realized that:

**וכל-הבארות אשר חפרו עבדי אביו, בימי אברהם אביו--סתמום פלשתים וימלאום עפר.**  
“Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth” (Gen 26:15).

One has to wonder why the Philistines would do such a foolish thing as to fill the wells with earth rather than exploit their precious water. In any case now we hear that Isaac digs again these wells of water and: **ויקרא להן שמות, כשמת אשר-קרא להן אביו** - “and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them” (Gen 26:18).

Yet we hear that after Isaac’s servants dug the first well of water, Isaac named it **עשק** - “Esek; because they [Gerar’s herdsmen] contended with him” (Gen 26:20). The same was the fate of a second well that was named: **שטנה** - “Sitnah” which means: “hate” (Gen 26:21).

After digging a third well of water that was not contented by the herdsmen of Gerar, Isaac named it **באר שבע** - **“And he called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said: For now YHWH have made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land”** (Gen 26:22).

It is clear that Isaac named these wells after the events involved and not by the names given to them by his father Abraham.

It seems that these three wells were in Gerar and we are now told about Isaac:

**ויעל משם באר שבע** - **“And he went up from thence to Beer-sheba”** (Gen 26:23). Although we read in Gen 26:22 that the third well was not contented by the herdsmen of Gerar, in Beer-sheba, Isaac will soon tell Abimelech of Gerar and his men:

**מדוע באתם אלי; ואתם שנאתם אתי ותשלחוני מאתכם.**

**“And Isaac said to them: Wherefore are you come to me, seeing you hate me, and have sent me away from you?”**

This appears as a more credible information that explains why Isaac would leave a water well that was just dug by his servants, and go up to **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) which did not have yet a functioning well of water.

In this new location, just after the visit of King Abimelech and some of his men, a visit that ended peacefully, even with a covenant approved by swearing one to another, Isaac's servants informed him that they just found water in the well that they were digging (Gen 26:26-32). Now we read about the naming of this well:

**ויקרא אתה שבעה; על-כן שם-העיר באר שבע עד היום הזה.**

**“And he called it Shibah. Therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day”** (Gen 26:33).

If Isaac named this well **שבעה** (*shiva'h*) after the oath that he swore with Abimelech and his men, then the name of the **“city of Beer-sheba”** has nothing to do with the well of water in a place (Gerar?) that Abraham named **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*), nor to the **מדבר באר שבע** - **“the wilderness of Beer-sheba”** of the Hagar's narrative. Furthermore, while **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) of Abraham was apparently in Gerar, Isaac is now going up from Gerar to his **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*), and the wording of this verse suggests that Isaac's **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) may have been in hilly or even a mountainous area.

This analysis suggests the possibility that the name **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) was a popular name that referred to several distinct locations.

In the Book of Genesis **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) is associated not only with Abraham (Gen 21:14; 21:31, 32, 33; 22:19), and Isaac (Gen 26:23, 33), but also with Jacob (Gen 28:10; 46:5).

We read that Jacob and his whole household left **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) to go down to Egypt (Gen 46:5-7). Yet it is odd that when Moses instructs the men who are about to spy out the land of Canaan, **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*), the town of their ancestors, is not mentioned. In fact, **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) is never referred to by Moses even when he relates to the Land of the Patriarchs.

Prior to the Israelite's war with Sihon king of the Amorites, we are informed that they met: **“the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the South”** (Num 21:1), yet **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*), which is just 31 mi. West of Arad, is not mentioned here.

In the list of the kings of the land that **“Joshua and the children of Israel smote beyond the Jordan westward”** (Jos 12:7), we read about **מלך ערד** - **“the king of Arad”** (Jos 12:14), yet here again there is no mention of a conquest of a place named **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*).

Surprisingly three chapters later we find that **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) and its villages become part of the inheritance of the tribe of Judah (Jos 15:28) or of the children of Simeon (Jos 19:1-2).

In the Book of Judges **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) is mentioned once:

**ויצאו כל-בני ישראל, ותקהל העדה כאיש אחד למדן ועד-באר שבע, וארץ הגלעד--אל-יהוה המצפה.**

**“Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation was assembled as one man, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, with the land of Gilead, to YHWH at Mizpah”** (Jud 20:1).

The phrase **מדן ועד-באר שבע** - **“from Dan even to Beer-sheba”** appears in another six biblical verses (1 Sam 3:20; 2 Sam 3:10; 17:11; 24:2, 15; 1 Ki 5:5). In addition there are two verses where we find: **מבאר שבע ועד-דן** - **“from Beersheba even to Dan”** (1 Ch 21:2; 2 Ch 30:5). The content of the verses containing these phrases appear to suggest that while **“Dan”** was the most northern place where Israelites resided, **“Beer-sheba”** was the southern reach of this population.

In the Book of Samuel we read:

**וישפט שמואל את-ישראל כל ימי חייו. והלך מדי שנה בשנה, וסבב בית-אל והגלגל והמצפה; ושפט את-ישראל--את כל-המקומות האלה.**

**ותשבתו הרמתה כי-שם ביתו, ושם שפט את-ישראל; ויבן-שם מזבח ליהוה.**

**“And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.**

**And he went from year to year in circuit to Beth-el, and Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all those places.**

**And his return was to Ramah, for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar to YHWH”** (1 Sam 7:15-17).

This description indicates that the Prophet Samuel operated in a rather limited area located in the center of the Israelites' territory. It is therefore peculiar to hear now:

ויהי כאשר זקן שמואל; וישם את-בניו שפטים לישראל.  
ויהי שם-בנו הבכור יואל, ושם משנהו אביה--שפטים בבאר שבע.

“And it came to pass, when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel.  
Now the name of his first-born was Joel; and the name of his second, Abijah; they were  
judges in Beer-sheba” (1 Sam 8:1-2).

We may assume that when Samuel became old it became physically difficult for him to circle annually between Beth-El, Gilgal, and Mitzpah and therefore he may have sought the help of his sons in judging the Israelites. But we have to wonder why instead of settling them in one of the many Israelite centers he installed them at the southern border of the Israelite territory, in a place that he apparently never visited. Furthermore, why would he send both of them to Beer-sheba, and not one of them to Dan, the northern edge of the settlement of the Israelites?

A possible solution to these difficulties is to assume again that there has been more than one place named **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*). Maybe one of them was a town located in the center of the Israelites' territory.

In the Book of Kings we read that when the Prophet Elijah fled the wrath of Queen Jezebel:  
**וירא ויקם וילך אל-נפשו, ויבא באר שבע אשר ליהודה; וינח את-נערו שם.  
והוא-הלך במדבר דרך יום,**

“And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness (1 Ki 19:3-4).

If the writer of this account felt it necessary to indicate that this **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*) belonged to Judah, we may wonder whether indeed there were also other places that had the same name. Such a case is not unusual. For example we read about: **“Beth-shemesh, which belongs to Judah”** (2 Ki 14:11; 2 Ch 25:21), and we also hear about two other **בית שמש** (*beith shemesh*), one of **יששכר** - “Issachar” (Jos 19:17-23), and the other of **נפתלי** - “Naphtali” (Jud 1:33).

This discussion brings us now to a lamentation over the house of Israel delivered by the Prophet Amos:

**כי כה אמר אדני יהוה, העיר היצאת אלף תשאיר מאה; והיוצאת מאה תשאיר עשרה לבית ישראל.**

**כי כה אמר יהוה לבית ישראל: דרשוני וחיו.**

**ואל-תדרשו בית-אל, והגלגל לא תבאו, ובאר שבע לא תעברו: כי הגלגל גלה יגלה, ובית-אל יהיה לאון**

**דרשו את-יהוה וחיו: פן-יצלח כאש בית יוסף, ואכלה ואין-מכבה לבית-אל.**

“For thus said my Lord *YHWH*: The city that went forth a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which went forth a hundred shall have ten left, of the house of Israel.

For thus said *YHWH* to the house of Israel: Seek you Me, and live;

But seek not Beth-el, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Beth-el shall come to naught.

**Seek YHWH, and live--lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, and there be none to quench it in Bethel” (Am 5:3-6).**

In regard to the “house of Joseph” the mention of **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*'), of the southern border of the territory of the Kingdom of Judah is not sound. It appears that already an early scribe was not comfortable with the mention here of **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*') and unlike “Gilgal” and “Beth-el” he does not tell us what would be the future of **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*').

The Greek translator of the Book of Amos, apparently also felt that the mention here of **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*') is problematic. Therefore, unlike his translation of the phrase **מזן ועד-באר שבע** - “**from Dan even to Beer-sheba**” (or of verse Am 8:14), where he translates **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*') to “bersabee” he translated **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*') of verse Am 5:5 to “well of oath” an interpretation previously found only in the Book of Genesis.

However, it seems that the Greek translator did not consider the possibility that the writer of the Book of Amos did not err, and that the **באר שבע** (*beer sheva*') of Am 5:5 was in another place, possibly located near the center of the Israelites' territory.