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Author(s): George L. Robinson

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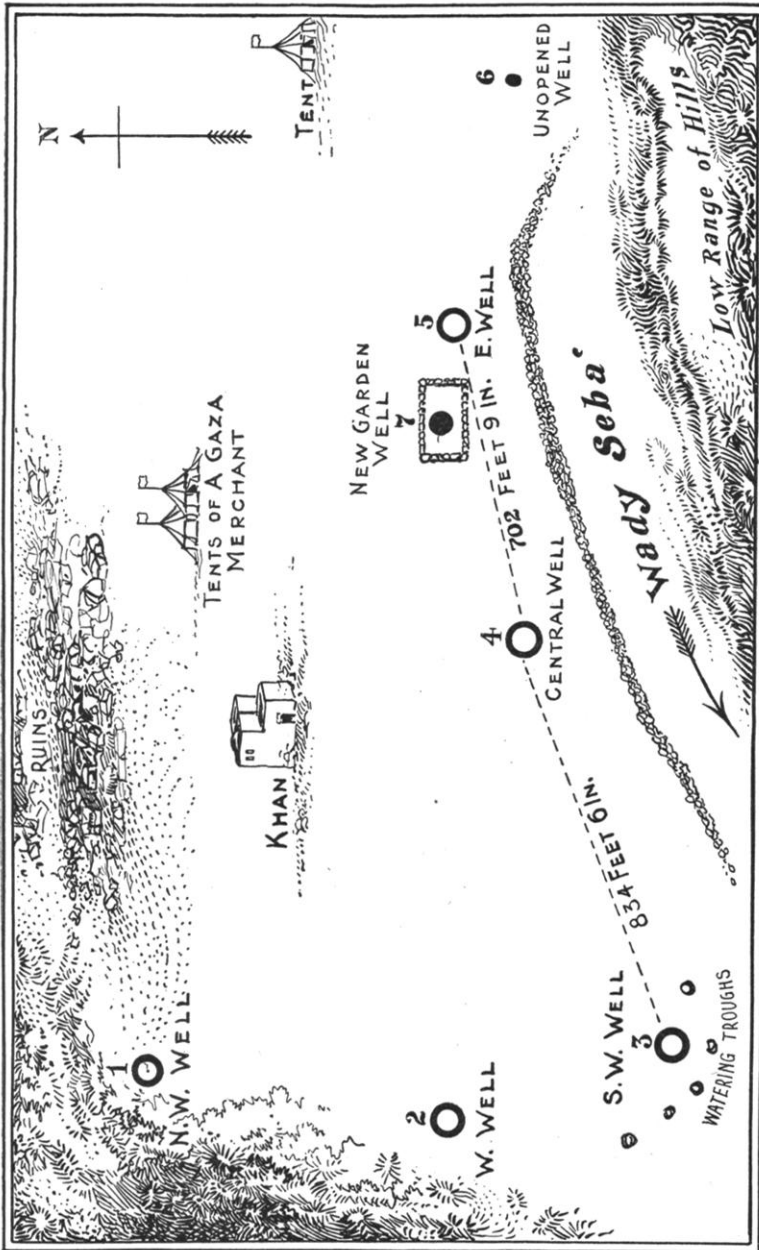
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## THE WELLS OF BEERSHEBA.

By PROFESSOR GEORGE L. ROBINSON, PH.D.,  
McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Ill.

It has long been an open question as to how many wells really exist at Beersheba, and what the true significance of the name **בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע** (Arab, Bir-es-Seba') is, whether "well of seven," or "seven wells," or "well of the oath," or "the well of the lion" (Arabs). The two accounts of the origin of the name are indecisive (*cf.* Gen. 21 : 31 and 26 : 31–33). As regards their number: (1) Robinson, 1856 (*Biblical Researches*, Vol. I, p. 204), describes two only; (2) Palmer, 1872 (*The Desert of the Exodus*, pp. 329 f.), three, with traces of four other "buried wells." (3) Tristram, 1882 (*Land of Israel*, p. 369), found five, two of which contained water. (4) Conder, 1887 (*Tent Work*, p. 247), saw three, but describes two only as containing water; also relates how he nearly fell into the third well. (5) George Armstrong, 1889 (*Names and Places in Old and New Testaments*, etc., p. 25), speaks of Beersheba as a ruin "with three wells." (6) G. A. Smith, 1895 (*Historical Geography*, p. 285), makes mention of seven wells at Beersheba, but in his more recent article on "Beersheba" in the *Encyclopædia Biblica* (1899) refutes his own statement with these words: "Few persons, it is to be hoped, go to Beersheba looking for seven wells." (7) Sayce, 1895 (*Patriarchal Palestine*, p. 180), speaks of two only as still existing. (8) Buhl, 1896 (*Geographie des alten Palästina*, p. 88), declares that two only of the celebrated wells are to be found containing water. (9) Trumbull, 1897 (*Expository Times*, p. 89), reports that in 1881 he saw two with water and one without, partially filled in, but observed signs of two others in the remoter vicinity. (10) Hull, 1898 (art. "Beersheba," *Hastings' Bible Dictionary*), remarks concerning them, "These are five or six in number;" two of which only he afterward describes as containing water. (11) L.



**WELLS OF BEERSHEBA.**

Gautier, 1899 (*Expository Times*, April, pp. 328, 329), who twice visited Beersheba (viz., in February, 1894 and 1899)—the second time especially to ascertain the exact number of the wells—says with confidence: “There are but three wells at Beersheba; besides these we have not been able to discover any remains of other wells in the neighborhood. I think, therefore, that the question of the number of the wells may be considered as settled, at least as far as our century is concerned.”

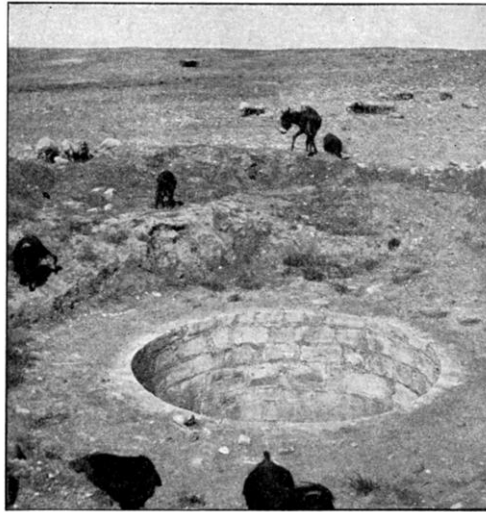
In face of such testimony and so recent, it seems somewhat incredible for one to come forward and be able to report that since Gautier’s visit in February, 1899, he has seen five wells containing water (of which four were in actual use), and two others which may soon be cleared out. Gautier visited Beersheba on February 28, 1899; the writer, on May 11, 1900.

I approached Beersheba from Hebron, having been previously forbidden by the government at Gaza to visit the place. Mr. Archibald Forder, of Jerusalem, accompanied me. We evaded the *Ḳaimaḳam* at Hebron by slipping out of town on foot, carrying our saddle-bags on our shoulders, and meeting our servant and animals on the edge of the city. The accompanying plan of Beersheba was sketched on the spot. The photographs, also, from which the half-tones were made are my own. We were not molested by the 'Azazimeh Arabs who occupy those parts; so remained as long as we chose.

#### I. GENERAL DESCRIPTION.

Beersheba is situated in Wady es-Saba', twenty-eight miles southwest from Hebron, at the southern border of a vast rolling plain broken by the torrent beds of Wadies Khalil and Saba'. The plain gradually slopes toward the southwest. It is bounded on the north and northeast by the foot-hills of Judah; on the east, by the white chalk hills of El Ghurrah; on the south, by the Negeb, or south country, which becomes hilly from Beersheba southward; and on the west, by a low ridge of hills which shut out the maritime plain. The plain about Beersheba is beautiful in early spring, but becomes dry and dusty in summer. There is no shade. The scenery we found featureless and uninteresting.

Traces of an ancient city which flourished in Jerome's time are still to be found to the north of the wells for two or three miles. Its ruins have been used of late in building coverings to several of the wells and for constructing a Khan. There are still to be traced the foundations of a Greek church not far to the north of the wells ; a slab with a marble cross upon it (two feet long) bearing a Greek inscription being shown me as one of the new discoveries made by the Arabs themselves. There was no water in the bed of the Wady when we were there in May, but there was every reason to believe that in winter a considerable volume fills the broad bed of the valley. A wall several hundred yards long



NORTHWEST WELL, BEERSHEBA

extends along the southern side of the valley bed. The wells themselves are also protected by an embankment which prevents the river water from getting direct access to the water of the wells. Great judgment was shown by the patriarch in the selection of the site, which, in some respects, is the most interesting in the south country. It is believed that copious springs exist at the bottom of the wells.

## II. THE WELLS DESCRIBED.

The exact depths of the different wells, how far they have been cut into the solid rock, and how old their walls, are difficult facts to determine. One thing is obvious to all who visit Beersheba, however, viz., that great skill was shown in cutting such immense wells out of the clay and limestone. They are much the largest wells to be found in Palestine. We visited

them in the order numbered in the plan. The measurements given are in many instances estimates only, made by Mr. Forder and myself, but supplemented in part by those actually made by Gautier and Dr. Alexander Paterson, of Hebron, Palestine.

1. *The northwest well.*—This well is located a little distance west of the Khan (see plan); has been dug out since January, 1900; is about 12 feet in diameter and 60 feet deep to the water; the walls for 10 feet down being built new; the lower walls



WEST WELL, WITH SAKIYEH, BEERSHEBA

being in apparently good condition. How deep the water may have been we were not able to determine. There was no Sakiyeh over the well's mouth, and from the newness of the masonry and the freshness of the earth about we assumed that the well was not yet in use.

2. *The west well.*—This well is located nearly south of the first and almost due west of the largest or central well. It is about 9 feet in diameter and 100 feet deep; one-third of the wall being lately rebuilt. A large square reservoir near by received the water when drawn. A new Sakiyeh had been recently built over the well's mouth, the earthen jars attached to ropes revolving over a wheel after the Egyptian manner of raising water. Many Arabs were about attending their flocks, some watering their animals, others reclining in the shade of the Sakiyeh.

3. *The southwest well.*—This is the “western” well of Gautier, and is situated, according to his own measurements,  $834\frac{1}{2}$  feet southwest of the central well (*cf. Expository Times*, April, 1899, p. 328). Its appearance is the most striking of all the wells at Beersheba, and it is the one most frequently seen in book illustrations. It is without a covering, the stones being deeply worn by the ropes which were used in drawing up the water. Numerous watering troughs are to be found near by, very primitive in appearance. When we were there, half-naked Arab men and closely veiled Arab women belonging to the 'Azazimeh tribe were busy drawing water by means of skin buckets attached to long ropes. The diameter of the well we estimated to be about 6 feet.



SOUTHWEST WELL, WITH ROPE-WORN GROOVES, BEERSHEBA

Gautier's measurements make it 5 feet  $4\frac{9}{10}$  inches in diameter and 44 feet  $7\frac{2}{10}$  inches in depth. There was no railing or barrier to prevent the shepherds or their animals from falling into the well—an accident which is not unknown, we were informed.

4. *The central well.*—This is Gautier's “middle” well (*cf. Expository Times*, April, 1899, p. 328). It is the largest of all. According to our estimates, it was about 15 feet in diameter; but, according to actual measurement by Conder, Gautier, and others, it is only 12 feet  $5\frac{3}{8}$  inches in diameter and 41 feet  $6\frac{1}{8}$  inches in depth. The diameter grows smaller toward the bottom. It is arched over, the water being raised by means of a pulley at the top of the arch upon which a rope, attached to an immense skin bucket, is drawn by a camel. The arched roof and pulley invention for raising the water were built in December, 1897. The Arabs here also were busy watering their flocks. This well is pointed to by the Arabs as the work of Ibrahim el-Khalil, that is, of Abraham the friend (of God). On the walls, however, at



a depth of fifteen courses, there is an inscribed tablet, dated 505 A. H., which indicates that the walls were either built or repaired during the twelfth century of our era.

5. *The east well.*—This is called by Gautier “the eastern well.” The distance between the central well and this one is 702 feet and 9 inches. This was the fifth well we saw which was dug out and actually contained water. Its diameter we estimated to be about 10 feet and its depth nearly as great as that of the



CENTRAL WELL, WITH PULLEY, BEERSHEBA

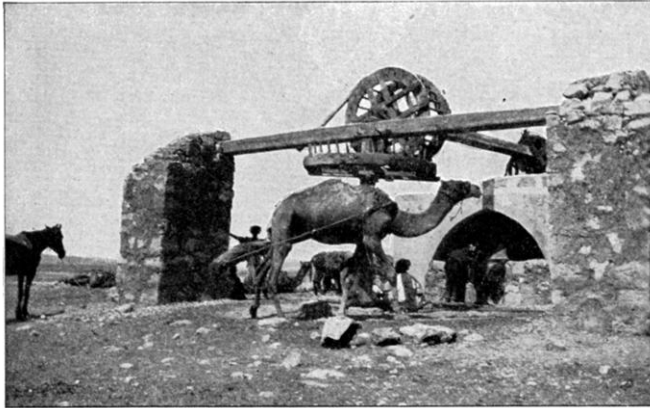
others we had visited. Gautier gives its exact diameter as 8 feet 11 inches and its true depth as 48 feet  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches. It has a Sakiyeh, which was built in July, 1897. A camel was working this Egyptian device for raising water, and was filling the cistern near by. At this point the shepherds who were standing about asked me why I was taking notes. This led into a conversation and finally to the discovery of the sixth well. At first, however, they were loth to tell us were it was.

6. *The unopened well.*—About 200 yards a little south of east from the fifth well visited we found an unopened well. There had been a slight digging into the top, enough to reveal the courses of stone which belong to its boundary wall. This was evidently a well which had long ago been stopped up. For we saw distinctly the grooves of the ropes which had been used at one time in drawing water. Grass covered the hollow depression, while loose stones lay about on the circular mound which



surrounded the well's mouth. I asked one of the Arabs who had accompanied us from the fifth well when it would be dug out; he replied: "When God wills."

At this stage in our investigation of the place we were delayed, being almost baffled by the unwillingness of the Arabs and of our Gaza guide to show us where the seventh well might be. At last, however, after repeated solicitations, the guide whispered:



EAST WELL, WITH SAKIYEH, BEERSHEBA

"I will show it to you, if you won't tell anyone" (*i. e.*, of the Arabs). I promised him to keep it an eternal secret from all his clan. We then returned to well No. 5. It was becoming hot, for we had spent several hours in our examination of the wells up to this point. Returning to the fifth well, Mr. Forder asked him where the seventh well might be. He replied (in true oriental fashion): "Oh, away over there, a long distance off." "Then," said Mr. Forder, "I think I will return to the merchant's tent up yonder and wait for you there." I gave my assent, and he went off. Presently the Arabs went about their work, whereupon my guide took me aside and whispered: "Come with me."

7. *The garden well.*—He led me almost due west from well No. 5, a distance of about 150 feet, bade me climb with him over a low wall, and, when he reached a certain spot in what was about the middle of a small garden, he said: "We are

standing upon an ancient well now." I asked: "How do you know?" He replied: "This last month I made this garden new, sifting the soil, removing the stones, and building this wall. As I dug down I came to stones built in the form of a circle, which I removed and put over there in that part of the wall



UNOPENED WELL, BEERSHEBA

[pointing to the northeast corner]. Some showed the marks of ropes upon them, while others were cut for water courses or aqueducts. You may come over and see them for yourself, if you like." I went, and to my great satisfaction there were the unmistakable evidences of a *seventh* well. "But," said he, beseechingly, "don't say anything

about it, or the Sheikh will take my garden away from me and dig out the well."

This is our reason for believing there are seven wells at Beersheba. Six I have actually seen and am certain about; the seventh I take on the testimony of this Gaza peasant, who had recently found the upper courses of the wall of a well while making a garden for himself between the "central well" and the well numbered 5. Had he not appeared more than ordinarily trustworthy, and had I not seen with my own eyes the groove-worn stones which he alleged came out of his garden, I would not place so much confidence in the circumstance; but in view of all that happened between us I am inclined to believe that there are (at least) seven wells at Beersheba.

Our conclusion is confirmed, not only by Arab tradition, which has its own special value, but by Strabo, who tells us that

among the Arabs there was a place called "Seven Wells" (16, 4, 24). Moreover, as R. Smith (*cf. Religion of the Semites*, p. 181) has abundantly shown, sanctity among the Semites is often associated with seven wells. And the root שבע, which literally means "to be seavened," or "to come under the influence of seven things," is an additional confirmation that our conclusion is correct; though, of course, it may still possibly refer to a transaction confirmed by seven victims, or made before seven witnesses (*cf. Coffin, Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1900, p. 183). The post-position of the numeral may easily be explained, with Stade, as Canaanitish, a parallel to which would then be Kirjath-arba, "city of four" (*cf. Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, Vol. I, p. 127).

The Turkish government, it may be added, has recently established a lieutenant-governorship at Beersheba, making it the residence of a *Qaimaḳam*.



ANCIENT WATERING TROUGH, BEERSHEBA