

Abraham & Abimelech

their covenant at Beersheba, and its meaning for the end time

by: Hugo Bouter

'Then Abraham reproved Abimelech because of a well of water (...) And he said, You will take these seven ewe-lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well. Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there.'

'We have certainly seen that the LORD is with you (...) and let us make a covenant with you (...) You are now the blessed of the LORD.'

Genesis 21:22-34; 22:19; 26:23-33

Beersheba, the place of the covenant

Beersheba occupies an important place in the lives of both Abraham and Isaac, as is clear from Genesis 21, 22 and 26. However, in chapter 21, Hagar is the first person we see near a well of water in 'the wilderness of Beersheba' (Gen. 21:14,19). It is certainly no accident that the name is mentioned in connection with her story, while the end of the chapter enlarges upon the significance of the place. Beersheba means 'the well of the oath'. The name is related to the Hebrew word for 'to swear' and the word for 'seven'; the latter because of the seven lambs that Abraham gave Abimelech as a witness that he had dug the well (Gen. 21:28 ff). So it is not far-fetched to assume this well of water meant much for these three Bible characters: Hagar, Abraham and Isaac.

Beersheba speaks of God's faithfulness to His promises, His oaths. God kept His word with regard to Abraham and Isaac, the heirs of the promise, but also in connection with the bondwoman, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael. Beersheba is always the place of the covenant, and symbolic of the faithfulness connected with the relationship of God to men, and that men should display to each other. This is apparent from what follows in chapters 21 and 26, where we read about the treaties between Abraham and Abimelech, and Isaac and Abimelech respectively. Just as God is true to His oaths, it is expected that we will be faithful in our relationships with others.

As New Testament believers we have the encouragement that whatever promises of God there are (and as the Son of the Father, Christ is Heir of all the promises), 'in Him is the yea, and in Him the amen, for glory to God by us' (2 Cor. 1:18-22). In that sense we may again and again draw from 'the well of the oath', until all that God has said and promised — both with regard to Israel and the Church and the nations — is fulfilled in a wonderful way.

Abraham at Beersheba

In the last verses of Genesis 21 we see how two people make a covenant together at Beersheba, near the 'well of the oath'. It is a treaty between the shepherd-king Abraham and Abimelech, the king of the Philistines (cf. Gen. 26:1). We can see them as the representatives of the people of Israel and of the Philistines, i.e., the Palestinians. Not that the present Palestinians are their direct descendants, but etymologically the name 'Palestine' is derived from 'Philistia'.

This story is a development of the history in Genesis 20, where an earlier conflict between the two men is described; a conflict where Sarah was at stake. That ended in a kind of reparation payment on the part of Abimelech, who hints at it here by speaking about his 'friendship', i.e. the faithfulness or loyalty he had shown Abraham (Gen. 21:23). The relationship between the two was subsequently recorded in a formal way in this covenant. Abimelech had demonstrated his faithfulness, and Abraham should do the same. That happened by the swearing of an oath at the well of water Abraham claimed as his (Gen. 21:23, 31). Later, a similar act took place between Isaac and Abimelech, and Phicol, the commander of his army, when Isaac's servants had re-dug 'the well of the oath' (Gen. 26:32-33). Abimelech means 'my father is king', and Phicol means 'mouth of all' (something like 'spokesman'). It is likely that these names were titles passed down from father to son, and that the Abimelech here was a different person from the one who met with Abraham.

The covenant with these pagan kings prophetically points to the end time when Israel will be restored and rule over the Philistines (cf. Isa. 11:14; Obad. 19). Then a really enduring peace will be made between the two. The splendid testimony given of Abraham: 'God is with you in all that you do' (Gen. 21:22), will have fully come true in that day.

After the making of the covenant, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba. This is a stately tree much resembling a cedar. Chapter 21, verse 33 says Abraham 'called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God'. This again is a hint of the coming Kingdom of Peace when God will be worshipped as *El-Olaam*, the Everlasting God. The government of the Prince of Peace will have no end. So Abraham knelt down as a worshipper near 'the well of the oath' and gave the Eternal God the thanks that He alone is entitled to receive.

Beersheba as a watch post

In Genesis 22 Beersheba is mentioned again, this time as Abraham and Isaac's residence. Just as they had gone together to Mount Moriah, they also returned together to Beersheba, to 'the well of the oath'. This is remarkable indeed, because in this very chapter we hear God swear by Himself, that He would bless Abraham richly, and that with (or 'in') his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:16-18). No doubt the patriarch returned to Beersheba with this delightful promise in his ears and often thought about it there.

This promise of blessing for all the earth reaches to the end time, to the coming Kingdom of Peace. Abraham looked forward to the day of Christ, the day of His appearing, and exulted in it (John 8:56). In Christ all God's promises are certain and secure. They will be fulfilled in God's time, for as we have seen already, in Christ 'is the yea, and in Him the amen, for glory to God by us' (2 Cor. 1:18-22).

Isaac at Beersheba

The oath God had sworn to Abraham and his offspring also applied to Isaac, the son of the promise, whom Abraham had received from the dead in a figurative sense (Heb. 11:18-19). The letter to the Hebrews confirms this by speaking about 'the heirs of the promise' in the plural. The oath is the end of every argument, and by it God wanted to show emphatically the unchangeableness of His purpose (Heb. 6:13ff).

Later, Isaac also lived in Beersheba. There the LORD appeared to him and confirmed the legality of the

promise He had made to Abraham. This divine revelation also turned Isaac into a worshipper. He built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD (Gen. 26:23-25). Isaac is a type of Christ as the risen and glorified Man in heaven, God's Beloved One, the Son of the promise, the Heir of everything. In truth He is the Blessed of the LORD (cf. Gen. 26:29). As Christians, we are His by faith, and share the blessings that have been promised to Him. Ours is a heavenly home and we can enjoy it, although we are still pilgrims on earth. Just like Isaac, we possess a 'tent', a 'well' and an 'altar' (Gen. 26:25).

The covenant between Isaac and Abimelech at Beersheba, at 'the well of the oath', speaks prophetically of the peace that will be made between Israel and the Palestinians in the coming Kingdom. The point is not that the Palestinians will acknowledge Israel's superiority, but that they will recognise the nation has been blessed by God Himself: 'You are now the blessed of the LORD' (Gen. 26:29). That will lay the basis for a permanent and enduring peace.

A promise for the end time

So it is that Beersheba in this passage points to the end time. Christ has now entered into heaven for us as our Forerunner and High Priest. He has become a Priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek. This 'appointment' did not take place without a solemn oath, for that matter, for God Himself has sworn and will not relent: 'You are a Priest for ever' (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:20-21).

But at His Coming He will exercise this eternal priesthood for the blessing of His earthly people, as had been indicated before in a prophetic way in the story of Abraham's victory over the kings of the east (Gen. 14:18-20). Just as Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek, the king and priest of Salem, the remnant of Israel will be blessed after all the conflicts of the end time by Christ, the true King and Priest of the Most High God, at His return from heaven. Then the nations will be blessed together with Israel. There will be peace for ever. Even former enemies will come and make a covenant with God's people, as Abimelech did with Isaac (Gen. 26:26-31). What a time of previously unknown blessing and prosperity that will be!