

Hebron

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Important Biblical events are set in the area of Hebron:

1. At Mamre, which the Bible places at or near Hebron, God promised Sarah and Abraham a son. Later Abraham bought a burial cave "in the field of Machpelah before Mamre." This received Sarah's body, then his own, and after that those of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

2. At Hebron, David ruled over Judah for seven and a half years before becoming king of all Israel.

[images/stories/general_art/beth/hebron/tell_hebron_from_s_600.jpg](#) The Tell of Hebron By enlarging the satellite photo on the right, you can get a look at the tell of the ancient city, with heights above sea level indicated in feet.

Judging from the heights, this was not a very defensible hill. (In Jerusalem, by contrast, the top of the city's hill was 150 feet higher than the Kidron Valley.) Hebron depended for its defense, rather, on the impregnability of the whole southern part of the mountain range. In this respect, its situation was good. It needed to defend only three points. It was centrally located among them, and all were within easy reach of cavalry reinforcements. The points were Beth Zur, Zif and Adoraim.

But before we go into this defensive system, let us look at the wider context. The central mountain range stretches like a loaf of bread, on a north-south axis, from the Jezreel Plain to the Negev Desert. In the middle of this range we find the Benjamin Plateau, between Bethel and Jerusalem. Over this plateau passed the southernmost good link between the two trunk roads that joined Egypt and Arabia to Damascus. Jerusalem barely grasped the plateau's southeastern edge, thus enjoying the best of two worlds: it had the commercial and agricultural advantages of the plateau, and yet deep valleys defended it.

http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general_art/beth/hebron/cmrange-map-large2.jpg Hebron, located in the highest settled part of the country (2600-3000 feet above sea level) South of Jerusalem, however, we are off the beaten track of antiquity. This part of the range, which at times belonged to the tribe of Judah, presents impediments to invading armies on the east, south and west. On the east and south are deserts. On the west, the mountain is steeply tilted (in places the rock layers bend 90 degrees). Moreover, the rivers of the Shephelah form a natural moat. (See map above.) From an ancient military standpoint, Mt. Judah is a landed peninsula. As long as someone was up there defending it, an army had little hope of success unless it included a major attack from the north (whence, said God through Jeremiah, [Jeremiah 1: 13-14](#): The word of Yahweh came to me the second time, saying, "What do you see?" I said, "I see a boiling caldron; and it is tipping away from the north." Then Yahweh said to me, "Out of the north evil will break out on all the inhabitants of the land. [disaster comes.]

In antiquity, the wider metropolitan area of Jerusalem extended south along the watershed past Bethlehem for a total of twelve miles. Further south there was still plenty of mountain, hence room for another city. Although this area was off the beaten international track, conditions were conducive for a local emporium.

These conditions were as follows (using [Yehuda Karmon and Avshalom Shmueli](#). Hebron: Dmuta shel Ir Hararit

(Portrait of a Mountain City). Tel Aviv: Guma, 1970. (Hebrew)|Karmon and Shmueli, Part Two): First, in the southern half of Mt. Judah, the peak occupies a long high stretch. With 62 square miles at over 3000 feet (and another 54 sq. mi. at over 2600), Hebron's metropolitan area forms the highest settled part of the country. Because of this height, nights are cool, the dew is heavy in summer, and there is plenty of winter rain (20 inches per year). The valleys mix alluvial soil with fertile loess (formed of sand blown in from the desert). All these factors combine to produce the legendary Hebron grapes. It was probably thanks to the grapes, by the way, that the Babylonians, in 586 BC, did not exile the vintners and farmers of this region. They wanted the wine! Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive of the poorest of the people, and the residue of the people who were left in the city, and those who fell away, who fell to the king of Babylon, and the residue of the multitude. But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left of the poorest of the land to be vineyard keepers and farmers. |Jeremiah 52:16

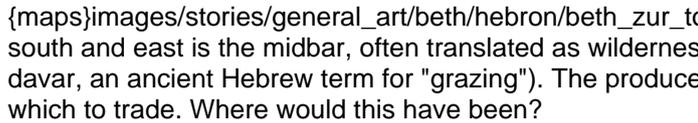
A Jewish tradition has Noah, after the flood, bringing a vine from Mt. Ararat to Hebron, and an Arab tradition recognizes his grave in Dura (Biblical Adoraim), five miles to the west. The Numbers 13: 16, 22-23 : These are the names of the men who Moses sent to spy out the land. ...They went up by the South, and came to Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the children of Anak, were there. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) They came to the valley of Eshkol, and cut down from there a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bore it on a staff between two...|Bible tells us that the men sent by Moses to spy out the land, having reached Hebron, hauled back from the Valley of Eshkol ("grapes") a cluster so large that two had to carry it on a pole. ("To spy," in the Biblical Hebrew, is to tur. The image of the two bearing grapes has become the official symbol of Israeli tourism.) Even today, grape clusters weighing four to six pounds are not uncommon. |Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, Orte und Landschaften der Bibel, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II. |Keel, p. 715).

Consider too how Jacob blessed Judah (Genesis 49: 11-12):

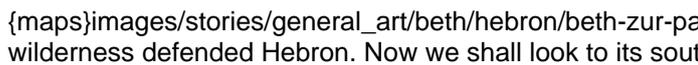
Binding his foal to the vine,
his donkey's colt to the choice vine;
he has washed his garments in wine,
his robes in the blood of grapes.
His eyes will be red with wine,
his teeth white with milk.

The milk would have been from the sheep and goats of Judah's desert, but the wine would have been from Judah's mountain top.

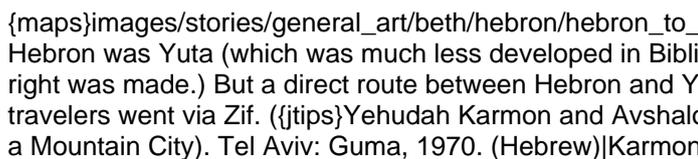
Yet grapes are not all. A bit to the south, and on the slopes leading down to the many river beds, the night air is not so cold; released from the risk of frost, olives and figs do well here. On the gentler southern and eastern descents toward Beersheba and Arad, the ancients would have grown barley and wheat.

 From Beth Zur to Hebron. Further south and east is the midbar, often translated as wilderness, but meaning, in its root, grazing land (midbar derives from *davar*, an ancient Hebrew term for "grazing"). The producers of these different products would have required a center in which to trade. Where would this have been?

Jerusalem, as said, was too far north. If we concentrate on the high, southern half of Mt. Judah, we find a bottleneck at Beth Zur. Here the Shinnar (Sa'ir) riverbed intrudes from the eastern wilderness, pushing traffic onto the narrow passage of the watershed, which is limited on the west by steep downward slopes. North and south of Beth Zur there is room again, and the roads can fan out. Therefore, the bottleneck at Beth Zur is the natural border between the northern and southern parts of Mount Judah. If you are ruling from Hebron, this narrow pass four miles away is the single point on your north side that you must take special care to defend.

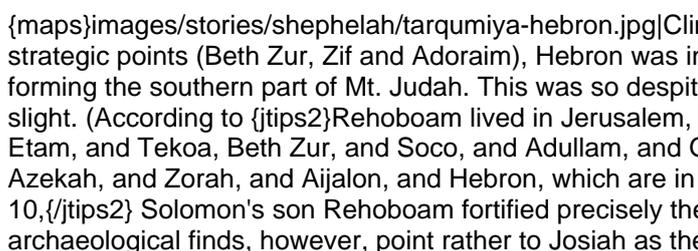
 Looking SW. As for the east, the wilderness defended Hebron. Now we shall look to its south.

In mountainous country, the best route is generally on the watershed, because there is no need to cross riverbeds. (See the satellite image above, for example.) Exceptions can occur if the watershed twists and turns; or the rock may be hard, and karstic erosion may have roughened it. The last two factors are the case on the watershed between Bene Na'im (pron. Bennay Na'eem) and Zif (see map below). Travelers between Beth Zur and points to the south, therefore, avoided this section of the watershed, using instead a broad and comfortable valley to its west. In this valley grew the city of Hebron. From here they could continue south through Zif, Carmel and Maon to Tell Malkhata. Tell Malkhata was the land's south-easternmost city in the Phase II of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1600 BC), when no town existed at Arad. The archaeological evidence indicates that it was rebuilt in the 10th century, probably by Solomon, perhaps as a station on the way from Jerusalem to Edom. (If it is mentioned in the Bible, we do not know by what name.) It was destroyed with fire, probably by Pharaoh Shishak (ca. 925 BC). Rebuilt, it continued to exist through the Edomite invasion of 586 BC. Of the pottery from the 6th-century BC, about a third is Edomite. The tell was settled again in the Hellenistic period. The Romans built a fortress on it, and the Byzantines maintained it. People were living here as late as the 8th century AD, the early Arab period. Tell Malkhata, with a side branch to Arad. They had other options as well. From Hebron they could take a secondary watershed southwest to Beersheba.

 From Hebron to Arad. Due south of Hebron was Yuta (which was much less developed in Biblical times than in the 1870's, when the Survey map on the right was made.) But a direct route between Hebron and Yuta was beset with harsh, interfering riverbeds. Instead, travelers went via Zif. Yehudah Karmon and Avshalom Shmueli. Hebron: Dmuta shel Ir Hararit (Hebron: Portrait of a Mountain City). Tel Aviv: Guma, 1970. (Hebrew) Karmon and Shmueli, p. 49).

The upshot is this: on the southeast, if you were ruling from Hebron, there was only one point that you had to take special care to defend, and that was Zif, four miles away.

What about the west side? Wadi Kof, the best route up from the west, is a valley, hence too dangerous for an army. The next conceivable route comes up to Adoraim, five miles from Hebron. This was the third point that had to be strongly defended. From here one could also intercept any group approaching on the watershed from Beersheba.

 Climbs to Hebron. Centrally located among the three strategic points (Beth Zur, Zif and Adoraim), Hebron was in a unique position to protect the high and fertile platform forming the southern part of Mt. Judah. This was so despite the fact that its immediate natural defenses as a city were slight. (According to Rehoboam lived in Jerusalem, and built cities for defense in Judah. He built Bethlehem, and Etam, and Tekoa, Beth Zur, and Soco, and Adullam, and Gath, and Mareshah, and Ziph, and Adoraim, and Lachish, and Azekah, and Zorah, and Aijalon, and Hebron, which are in Judah and in Benjamin, fortified cities. 2 Chronicles 11: 5-10.) Solomon's son Rehoboam fortified precisely these four in the region: Hebron, Beth Zur, Zif and Adoraim. The archaeological finds, however, point rather to Josiah as their fortifier.)

Hebron's name implies its function. The Hebrew root, kh-v-r, means to bind. A khaver is a friend. In the Quran 4.125 : Who is better in religion than he who surrendereth his purpose to Allah while doing good (to men) and followeth the tradition of Abraham, the upright ? Allah (Himself) chose Abraham for friend. Allah has taken "Abraham as friend," and because of Hebron's connection with Abraham, Arabs also call it al-Khalil, the city of the friend. (Compare Didn't you, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it to the seed of Abraham your friend forever? 2 Chronicles 20:7, Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works, in that he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith worked with his works, and by works faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness;" and he was called the friend of God. You see then that by works, a man is justified, and not only by faith. James 2: 21-24.)

 From Lachish toward Hebron. If we go back to the meaning of Hebron as "to bind," "to connect," we may link this to its geopolitical function. Hebron might have served as a place of alliance among Beth Zur, Zif and Adoraim. This could account for the other name the Bible gives it: Qiryat Arba, "the city of the four." (Now the name of Hebron before was Kiriath Arba, after the greatest man among the Anakim. Joshua 14:15, however, mentions Arba as a man, the greatest among the Anakite giants who once lived there.) We may recall, as well, the four basic kinds of produce, based on the four regions joined by it, for which Hebron served as emporium: grapes, olives, grain and milk.

{mospagebreak title=Seeking Mamre }

Looking for Mamre

The Biblical accounts of Mamre single out a tree and a cave.

1. The tree.

According to Genesis 13:18, after parting from Lot, "Abram moved his tent, and came and lived by the great tree of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built an altar there to the Lord." (The Masoretic text always has the "great trees of Mamre," but the The Greek translation of the First Testament (3d century BC) Septuagint consistently uses the singular. The credibility of the Septuagint has risen since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and we shall follow it.)

In Genesis 18:1, Yahweh appears to Abraham:

Yahweh appeared to him by the great tree of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and saw that three men stood opposite him. When he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, "My lord, if now I have found favor in your [singular in Hebrew] sight, please don't go away from your servant. Now let a little water be fetched, wash your [plural] feet, and rest yourselves [plural] under the tree. I will get a morsel of bread so you can refresh your heart. After that you may go your way, now that you have come to your servant."

The unique combination of singular and plural, the plural being three, was taken by Christians as First Testament evidence that the Holy Trinity visited Abraham. It established the special importance of Mamre for them. The account continues with the preparation of a meal for the guests (18:6-14):

They said, "Very well, do as you have said." Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quickly prepare three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and fetched a tender and good calf, and gave it to the servant. He hurried to dress it. He took butter, milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them. He stood by them under the tree, and they ate. They asked him, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" He said, "See, in the tent." He said, "I will certainly return to you when the season comes round. Behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." Sarah heard in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age. Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old will I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" Yahweh said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Will I really bear a child, yet I am old?' Is anything too hard for Yahweh? At the set time I will return to you, when the season comes round, and Sarah will have a son."

The name of Isaac, the child of this promise, is yitzhak in Hebrew, meaning "He will laugh." Here we have part of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, as stated earlier, for example in Genesis 15:5.

Yahweh brought him outside, and said, "Look now toward the sky, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." He said to Abram, "So shall your seed be."

But this promise harks farther back, to Genesis 12:1-3.

Now Yahweh said to Abram, "Get out of your country, and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you. All of the families of the earth will be blessed in you."

This passage is the transition from the primeval world history (Genesis 1-11) to the particular history of Abraham and his descendants. In the former, a pattern is established (first perceived by Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, London: SCM Press, 1966. von Rad): God creates, human beings sin, God punishes them, but then he performs a redeeming act that enables humankind to continue. He makes clothes for Adam and Eve, He puts a mark on Cain's forehead, He saves Noah's family and the animals, two of each kind. Then comes the sin of the Tower of Babel. God destroys it and scatters the nations, confusing their tongues. What will be the new redeeming act? Precisely here we get the birth and call of Abram: All the (dispersed) families of the earth will be blessed by him, through his seed. That is, they will be brought back into their proper relationships with one another and with God. Significant parts of the First and Second Testaments are devoted to showing how this ultimate act of redemption is to unfold.

2. The cave.

Some years after giving birth to Isaac, Sarah died "in Kiryat Arba, that is Hebron." Genesis 23:10-11. Now Ephron was sitting in the middle of the children of Heth. Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the children of Heth, even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, "No, my lord, hear me. I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the children of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead." In the gate of the city, Abraham negotiated with Ephron the Hittite to purchase a cave in which to bury her. Ephron offered the cave as a gift, but Abraham insisted on buying it. Thus, although "a stranger and sojourner" (Genesis 23:4), he achieved a legal claim to a piece of the land God had promised him. The language has a distinctive legalistic ring (23:17-20):

So the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all of its borders, were deeded to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre (that is, Hebron), in the land of Canaan. The field, and the cave that is in it, were deeded to Abraham for a possession of a burying place by the children of Heth.

We find the same phrasing [Genesis 23:19](#) :After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre (that is, Hebron), in the land of Canaan. Each time one of the patriarchs is buried: the cave is in the field of Machpelah before Mamre. Since the mental map of Biblical humans generally had them facing east (as in the Hebrew of Zechariah 14:8, for example) the cave would have been east of Mamre.

Where then was Mamre?

Clearly, if the Bible is correct, Mamre must have been just west of the place where the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried. The burial place has been identified for at least 2000 years with a cave in Hebron, over which Herod ruled the land under Roman auspices from 37 - 4 BC. After his death, the Romans called him "the Great" because of his building activities. Christians chiefly remember him, however, as the killer of the innocent children (Mt. 2: 16). Herod built a magnificent temple. The word is from the Greek *temnein*, meaning "to cut off." It is an area set apart for religious rites. Often it is enclosed by a wall and open to the heavens. Examples are the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Herodian structure at Hebron. *temenos* that still stands today.

Slightly more than one kilometer northwest of Hebron (the Hellenistic-Roman Hebron) is a site called *khirbet nimra*, the Ruin of Nimra, which has yielded up the remains of a large building from the 6th-5th centuries BC, but nothing earlier. Hebron itself was deserted at this time, the Persian period, although later it developed in the valley near the cave. Since "m" has a way of becoming "n," the name Nimra is tantalizingly close to Mamre.

Moreover, in the [Josephus Flavius, The Wars of the Jews](#), translated by William Whiston (Josephus' Jewish War (4:533), after mentioning the patriarchs' tombs in the "little town" of Hebron, Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War, The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus describes "an immense terebinth" of his own day, "said to be as old as creation." The sentence only makes sense, occurring where it does, with reference to the Biblical tradition of Mamre. Josephus locates the tree eight stadia from the town. That amounts to slightly more than one kilometer, the same distance as Nimra. (Detlef Jericke, *Abraham in Mamre: Historische und exegetische Studien zur Region von Hebron und zu Genesis 11,27-19,38*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003) pp. 48-52.) If this terebinth was at Nimra, that would be another reason to identify the latter with Mamre. The cave over which Herod built his structure would indeed be "before" it, southeast to be exact, at the end of a field. (For a view toward the south, go [here](#).)

http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general_art/beth/hebron/nimra5.jpg The Ruin Of Nimra Strangely, in addition to the Hebron *temenos*, Herod (or someone copying him) built another structure (or part of it) two miles north of the ancient city, and the Byzantines identified it as Mamre. It was distinguished by a great tree that died about 1650 years ago.

(To add another puzzle, Josephus does not mention either of the Herodian buildings: not the one in Hebron and not the one two miles to the north. The Jewish sources do not mention them either.)

In the Crusader period, the Mamre tradition moved. An eminent tree at the foot of Hebron's tell was identified as the one under which Abraham had received his guests.

In the 19th century another tree became impressive. This stood about 1.5 miles northwest of the tell. Russia bought the property and built a monastery there, identifying it as the tree of Mamre. A remnant can be seen today.

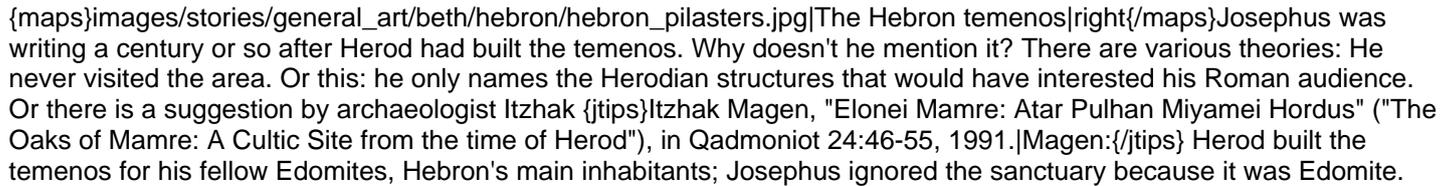
{mospagebreak title=Tombs of Patriarchs}

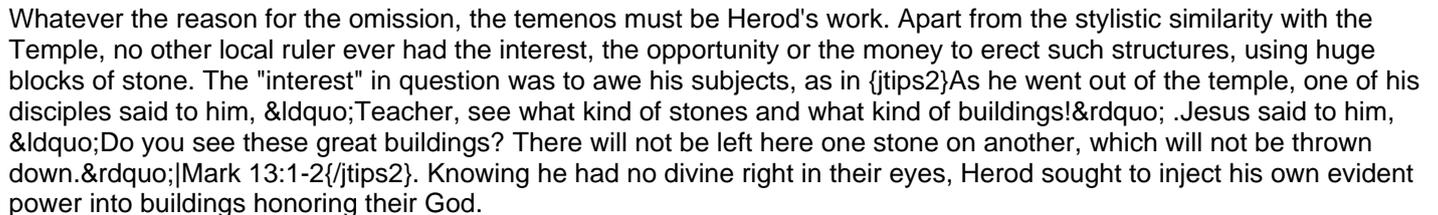
Tombs of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs

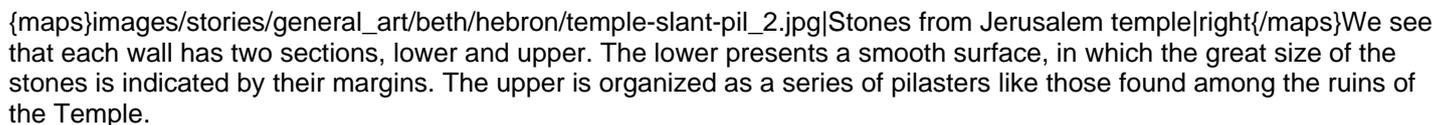
According to Genesis 13:18, 14:13 and 18:1. Abram moved his tent, and came and lived by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built an altar there to Yahweh (13:18). One who had escaped came and told Abram, the Hebrew. Now he lived by the oaks of Mamre, the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner; and these were allies of Abram (14:13). Yahweh appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day (18:1). In three passages in Genesis, Abraham had his camp at Mamre, which was "at" or "near" Hebron. After Sarah died, he negotiated with Ephron the Hittite, in the gate of Hebron, to buy a cave in which to bury her (Genesis 23). This cave was in the field of Machpelah before Mamre. He too was buried there, as were Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah. All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father spoke to them and blessed them. He blessed everyone according to his blessing. He instructed them, and said to them, "I am to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as a burial place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah, his wife. There they buried Isaac and Rebekah, his wife, and there I buried Leah: the field and the cave that is therein, which was purchased from the children of Heth." When Jacob made an end of charging his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the spirit, and was gathered to his people. (Genesis 49: 28-33).

In the heart of today's Hebron is a magnificent stone enclosure, a *temenos*. The word is from the Greek *temnein*, meaning "to cut off." It is an area set apart for religious rites. Often it is enclosed by a wall and open to the heavens. Examples are the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Herodian structure at Hebron. The elements of design and masonry are identical with those found among the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem, which is confidently dated to Herod (a conclusion based on both Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus and the archaeological finds). But in Hebron we need not speak of ruins. This is the structure itself, complete. It is the land's only intact monumental building from the Roman period. Beneath its floor are chambers, including a burial cave. Byzantine pilgrims referred to the structure and identified the cave as the one from Genesis 23.

Curiously, we cannot say the same for an earlier source: Josephus. In the *The Jewish War*, translated by G.A. Williamson, Penguin, 1981 (IV, 533) he writes of Abraham and his descendants, with regard to Hebron: "Their tombs are pointed out to this day in the little town, of the finest marble and beautifully fashioned. Three quarters of a mile from the town can be seen an immense terebinth, said to be as old as creation." That is all he says on the topic.

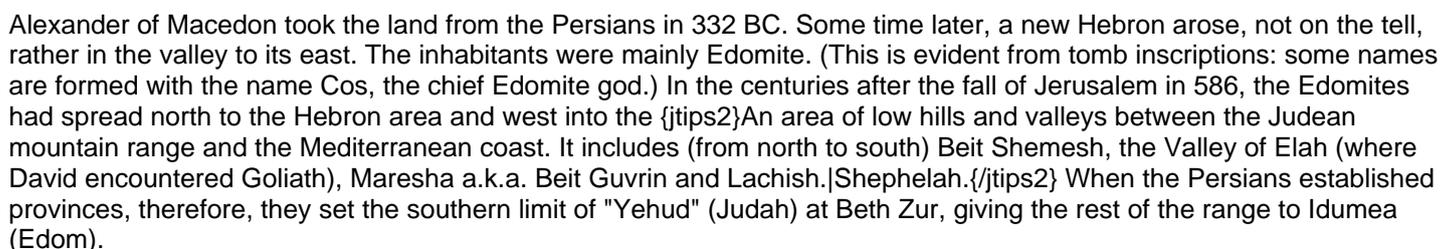
The Hebron temenos Josephus was writing a century or so after Herod had built the temenos. Why doesn't he mention it? There are various theories: He never visited the area. Or this: he only names the Herodian structures that would have interested his Roman audience. Or there is a suggestion by archaeologist Itzhak Magen, "Elonei Mamre: Atar Pulhan Miyamei Hordus" ("The Oaks of Mamre: A Cultic Site from the time of Herod"), in Qadmoniot 24:46-55, 1991. Magen: Herod built the temenos for his fellow Edomites, Hebron's main inhabitants; Josephus ignored the sanctuary because it was Edomite.

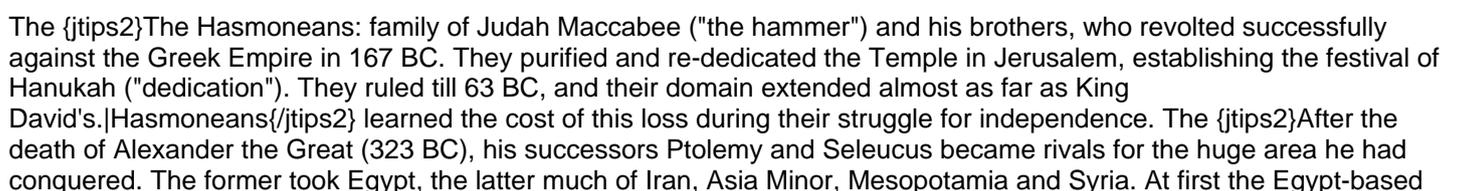
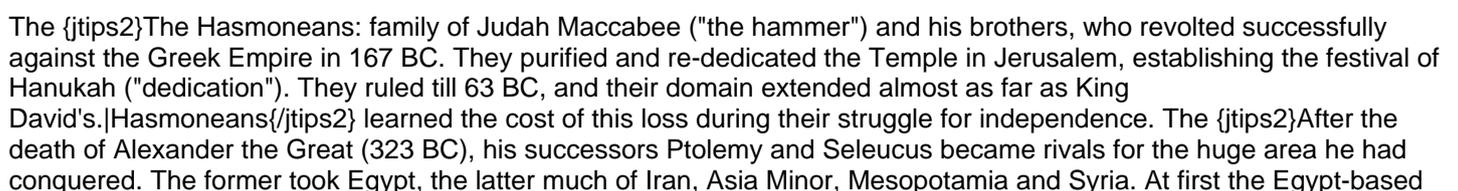
Whatever the reason for the omission, the temenos must be Herod's work. Apart from the stylistic similarity with the Temple, no other local ruler ever had the interest, the opportunity or the money to erect such structures, using huge blocks of stone. The "interest" in question was to awe his subjects, as in As he went out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Teacher, see what kind of stones and what kind of buildings!" Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone on another, which will not be thrown down." Mark 13:1-2. Knowing he had no divine right in their eyes, Herod sought to inject his own evident power into buildings honoring their God.

We see that each wall has two sections, lower and upper. The lower presents a smooth surface, in which the great size of the stones is indicated by their margins. The upper is organized as a series of pilasters like those found among the ruins of the Temple.

If we want to use the Hebron temenos as an aid in imagining the walls of the Jerusalem Temple, we only need bracket the later additions, restore the whiteness of the limestone and enlarge the scale: the Temple walls soared about 100 feet above the street level and contained an area of 35 acres, whereas the walls of the Hebron temenos are about 60 feet high and contain half an acre.

We may picture the situation leading to the choice of this spot. Hebron was deserted from the late 6th century BC until the 3d. During this time, there was a settlement on the hill just north of the tell, at a distance of one kilometer (the same distance as the tree mentioned by Josephus above). The Arabs would later call the site Nimra, which may preserve the name Mamre. (See satellite image below.)

Alexander of Macedon took the land from the Persians in 332 BC. Some time later, a new Hebron arose, not on the tell, rather in the valley to its east. The inhabitants were mainly Edomite. (This is evident from tomb inscriptions: some names are formed with the name Cos, the chief Edomite god.) In the centuries after the fall of Jerusalem in 586, the Edomites had spread north to the Hebron area and west into the An area of low hills and valleys between the Judean mountain range and the Mediterranean coast. It includes (from north to south) Beit Shemesh, the Valley of Elah (where David encountered Goliath), Maresha a.k.a. Beit Guvrin and Lachish. Shephelah. When the Persians established provinces, therefore, they set the southern limit of "Yehud" (Judah) at Beth Zur, giving the rest of the range to Idumea (Edom).

The Hasmoneans: family of Judah Maccabee ("the hammer") and his brothers, who revolted successfully against the Greek Empire in 167 BC. They purified and re-dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, establishing the festival of Hanukah ("dedication"). They ruled till 63 BC, and their domain extended almost as far as King David's. Hasmoneans learned the cost of this loss during their struggle for independence. The After the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC), his successors Ptolemy and Seleucus became rivals for the huge area he had conquered. The former took Egypt, the latter much of Iran, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Syria. At first the Egypt-based

Ptolemies ruled the biblical land, but around 200 BC, the Seleucid Antiochus III inflicted a major defeat on them at Baniyas, enabling him to take over the country. Seleucids were able to ascend the mountain unopposed through Idumea in 163, bringing war elephants and defeating the Hasmoneans near Beth Zur. It was vital, then, to control Idumea in order to benefit from the mountain's natural defenses. Judah Maccabee conquered Idumea by 161.

The Judean claim on the Hebron area could take heart from Genesis 23, which stressed the fact that Abraham had purchased the burial cave, rather than accepting it as a gift. The significance was that he, a nomad, thereby established a first legal hold on a piece of the promised land. Given the fact that Jacob too was buried in the cave, this hold would extend to Jacob's descendants (and not to Esau's, the Edomites!). The land claim is reflected in the careful, legalistic language of Genesis 23: 17-20.

So the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all of its borders, were deeded to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre (that is, Hebron), in the land of Canaan. The field, and the cave that is in it, were deeded to Abraham for a possession of a burying place by the children of Heth.

http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general_art/beth/hebron/nimra_looking_s2.jpg If Nimra was Mamre As part of their national and religious revival, Judah and his fellow Hasmoneans would have been eager to identify the burial cave, thus reestablishing the Judean connection with Hebron. In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (I, 7), originally a Hebrew document from around 109 BC (that is, a year or so after the forcible conversion of the Edomites), we read that Ruben was buried with his ancestors in the double cave ("Machpelah") at Hebron. Unless the writer is merely copying the location from Genesis 23 and omitting Mamre, this would indicate that by 109 BC the cave was identified.

At this time the city was in the valley, bordered by the hill containing the cave. Into this hill, and over the cave, Herod built the structure we see today. If "Nimra" was indeed Mamre, then the place where the Hellenistic city later arose might have been "the field of Machpelah," and the cave over which Herod built would have been "before Mamre." (As a Biblical spatial reference, "before" generally means "east of.")

In the course of the centuries, Herod's temenos received additions from Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The original structure was probably open to the heavens, but only a small portion remains thus, the inner part having been adapted first into a Byzantine church (where Jews were permitted to pray), then a mosque, then a Crusader church, and then again the present mosque, although parts were transformed by Israel after 1967 into two small synagogues. Within are six large coffin-shaped monuments (cenotaphs) representing the tombs of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

The cave

For most of the last 2000 years, the chambers beneath the temenos floor have been off limits. Despite a few attempts to explore them, our information remains fragmentary.

The axis of the building runs WNW-ESE. This is unique among the land's monumental religious structures. (The orientation proved uncongenial for the churches, mosques and synagogues later built into it: the churches couldn't face east, the mosques couldn't face south, and the synagogues couldn't face Jerusalem.) It seems likely that this orientation was determined by the layout of the cave it covered.

In 1119, newly arrived Crusader monks discovered a cleft in the floor through which a light breeze wafted. "In the name of the holiest trinity, and with some hesitation" they made an opening. (The reference to the trinity relates to Genesis 18.) After a day of battling through various walls, they discovered the bones of the patriarchs buried in the earth. (Text in [E. J. Vincent, H. Mackay and F.M. Abel, Hebron: Le Haram el-Khalil, Paris, 1923](#) | [Vincent](#), 166-76.) The find attracted Crusader pilgrims, whose money financed the building of the church that today forms the structure within which the mosque and synagogues are found. ([Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, Orte und Landschaften der Bibel, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II](#) | [Keel](#), p. 685.)

Based on the Crusader account, Vincent made the following reconstruction of the chambers.

Under Crusader auspices, the cave became accessible. A Jewish visitor, Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (1160 AD), reported that Jews could descend by a staircase. After passing through two rooms, one entered a third, he said, containing the six graves. (This would correspond to the cave, No. 7, in Vincent's reconstruction above.) A light burned here day and night, and the names of the honored dead were inscribed on the tombs. There were also baskets, he reported, containing the bones of Israelites. ([Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, Orte und Landschaften der Bibel, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II](#) | [Keel](#), p. 685.)

After the Mamlukes drove the Crusaders from the land in 1291, they turned the church into a mosque, allowing entry to Muslims only. The caves became taboo, as they are to this day. "The people of Hebron believe that Abraham, in his proverbial goodness, would forgive an intrusion, but that Isaac, considered zealous, would let loose at every trespasser." ([Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, Orte und Landschaften der Bibel, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II](#) | [Keel](#), p. 685, referring to [A. E. Mader, Mambre, Freiburg i. Br., 1957](#) | [Mader](#), p. 121, note 2.)

A British officer wandered, nonetheless, into one of the chambers in 1917 and smoked a pipe, only realizing some years later where he had been. After him, the next intruder was a 12-year-old girl named Michal. Soon after the 1967 War, Israeli general Moshe Dayan lowered her through a narrow shaft (No. 8 in Vincent's drawing). She traced the route of the Crusader monks in the reverse direction.

Summarizing remarks by archaeologists Shmuel Yeivin, Avi Ofer and Yitzhak Magen concerning the cave, [Detlef Jericke, Abraham in Mamre: Historische und exegetische Studien zur Region von Hebron und zu Genesis 11,27-19,38, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003](#) | [Jericke](#) (p. 18) writes: "According to the latest information, we should probably date the burial places to the 2100 BC – 1550 BC | Middle Bronze Age and the end of the 1200 BC – 586 BC | Iron Age. Burial places from these periods were also found in the Hebron area and on Mount Rumeida [to which Tell Hebron belongs]."

{mospagebreak title=Byzantine Mamre }

Byzantine Mamre

In Genesis 23: 17-20, Mamre serves as the reference point for locating the cave where Abraham buried Sarah. The cave is "before Mamre" (literally, "in front of Mamre"), which in Biblical parlance means "east of Mamre." This cave became the burial place of the other patriarchs and matriarchs, except Rachel.

Herod ruled the land under Roman auspices from 37 - 4 BC. After his death, the Romans called him "the Great" because of his building activities. Christians chiefly remember him, however, as the killer of the innocent children (Mt. 2: 16). Herod built a magnificent Temenos. The word is from the Greek temnein, meaning "to cut off." It is an area set apart for religious rites. Often it is enclosed by a wall and open to the heavens. Examples are the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Herodian structure at Hebron. A temenos over a cave in the Hebron of his day, presumably to honor the graves. Those who advised him in this enterprise, if they consulted the Bible, would have located Mamre in the vicinity.

 Strangely, though, a place not in the vicinity, rather two miles north of ancient Hebron, became the "Mamre" of the Byzantine period – that is, the period of the Eastern Christian Roman Empire – may be dated from 330 AD, when Constantine re-named the city of Byzantium "Constantinople" and dedicated it to the God of the Christians. Its end, in this land, came in 638, when the Muslims took Jerusalem. Elsewhere it lasted much longer: Constantinople finally fell to the Turks in 1453. Byzantines. Before that it seems to have been called Terebinthus, after a great tree that grew there. Exploring the site in the late 1920's, A.E. Mader, A. E. Mambre. Freiburg i. Br., 1957. Mader discovered a temenos. He identified parts of it as Herodian but dated others to Publius Aelius Hadrianus (76 – 138 AD). Roman emperor from 117 until his death. He quelled the Bar Kokhba revolt, the second major Jewish uprising in the land. After banishing the Jews from Jerusalem, he rebuilt the city, naming it Aelia Capitolina. He is also remembered as the builder of Hadrian's Wall in northern England. Hadrian. Sixty years later, Itzhak Magen, "Elonei Mamre: Atar Pulhan Miyamei Hordus" ("The Oaks of Mamre: A Cultic Site from the time of Herod"), in Qadmoniot 24:46-55, 1991. Magen uncovered the outer portion of its northern and eastern walls, finding pilasters similar in design with those found in the rubble by the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and those found complete at Hebron. Disagreeing with Mader, Magen concluded that the entire enclosure was Herodian and that it had been finished. He held, moreover, that it was the site's oldest structure. (Mader had dated two constructions to Iron II, but on the basis of pottery found beneath them, Magen redated them as post-Byzantine.)

Whether the enclosure is partly or entirely Herodian, what would Herod have been commemorating? Scholars assume that it was Mamre, because in the 4th century AD Byzantine authors, builders and pilgrims explicitly identified Mamre here. This doesn't make sense though. For again: Genesis insists that the burial cave was "before Mamre" - east of Mamre - and the burial cave was beneath Herod's temenos in Hebron.

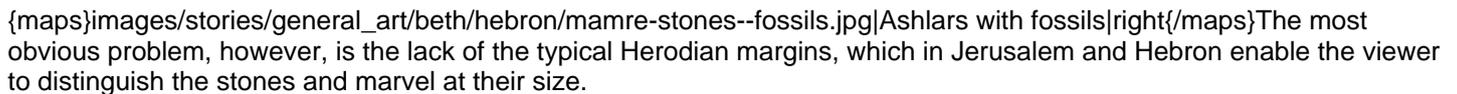
In terms of archaeology, the oldest possibility that we have for Mamre is Khirbet Nimra, the Ruin of Nimra, one kilometer north of ancient Hebron. (The burial cave lies southeast of it.) The name "Nimra" may be derived from "Mamre." This was perhaps the place that Herod's people knew as Mamre when they built the temenos over the burial cave in Hebron. More on Nimra...

No one doubts that it was Herod who built the magnificent structure over the cave in Hebron. Would he have recognized and honored Mamre two miles to the north of it, despite the Biblical text? Unlikely. What then would Herod and friends have been commemorating here? There is no definitive answer, but the site is very strange. There are elements that are undoubtedly Herodian and others that seem quite different.

Consider the southern wall:

First, the stones are large. Herod was the only ruler in this land, as far as we know, who built with massive stones. The biggest in this wall (indeed, in the entire remaining structure) is 15 feet long and 3.7 feet high. That is not nearly as big as in Hebron or Jerusalem, but one can explain the difference. In Hebron and Jerusalem, Herod was contending with steep hills. He had to build high in order to achieve a level platform inside, so he needed massive stones for strength in the lower courses at the corners. Here, in contrast, the slope is slight. (Itzhak Magen, "Elonei Mamre: Atar Pulhan Miyamei Hordus" ("The Oaks of Mamre: A Cultic Site from the time of Herod"), in *Qadmoniot* 24:46-55, 1991. Magen, p. 51)

The stones get larger as they go higher (a unique feature). This adds to the monumental impression, despite the wall's relative lowness. Aesthetically, however, such an arrangement would not make sense if the wall was intended to support pilasters, as Magen believes. It would have appeared to be bellying out.

The most obvious problem, however, is the lack of the typical Herodian margins, which in Jerusalem and Hebron enable the viewer to distinguish the stones and marvel at their size.

Magen explains the lack of margins by noting that this particular limestone is full of sea fossils, which would have made it hard to cut neat, straight lines. He did find one "fossily" example with margins, but the lines were not neat. He thinks the stones were quarried nearby.

There are problems with this explanation, however.. First, there are non-fossily stones with margins in the north and east walls. Herod was not the type to mix stones and styles in a single structure. There is good normal limestone in the area. The stones needed here would not have been so big as to preclude transportation.

Second, in the north and east walls there were pilasters, beginning at a level flush with the inside floor. (They also began at the inside floor level in Hebron and Jerusalem.) Some had slanting stones, joining the flat lower section with the insets between the pilasters, while others did not.

In the above diagram, we note further evidence of different building phases. On the inside of the enclosure, in the southeast corner, Magen found traces of a water system, including a wall with stones like those in the foundations of the Jerusalem Temple. This water system was evidently superseded by the well in the southwest corner. (The latter is 22 feet deep. Even today, when emptied it refills. The combination of well, tree and altar was typical of open-air sanctuaries in the Ancient Near East. Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger. *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II|Keel, pp. 188-90.)

Near this well, the insides of the temenos walls were built with recesses to increase the space around it. The well, then, preceded the walls. We have the following sequence:

1. Water system in SE corner, replaced by...
2. Well in SW corner.
3. The south and west walls.

The top levels of the south and west walls are even. In the west wall, at the right, is the main entrance. The floor, says Magen, would have been flush with its threshold.

What story can we tell to make sense of all this? Someone started building the northern and eastern walls in Herodian style, although inconsistently (sometimes making slants between pilasters, sometimes not). Perhaps he used surplus pieces from the building of the Hebron temenos. This first phase included a water system at the southeast corner. Then the well was dug in the southwest corner. Then someone completed the enclosure on the south and west with a different, fossil-filled limestone. (He incorporated, by the way, unused pieces of a gate in the western wall.) It is unclear whether he completed the pavement as planned.

There is no evidence that anyone called the site Mamre in the Roman period. The After the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis began elaborating Jewish law until this covered the minute details of everyday life, with the result that Jews could maintain their identity as Jews even in dispersion and without the Temple. At Sepphoris in 200 AD the elaborated law was committed to writing: the Mishnah. The word means "instruction handed down by word of mouth." Apparently, problems had arisen with the oral transmission, and it was necessary to provide judges and teachers with a written code. (According to one theory, many teachers had died in the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and a fear arose that the oral law, unless written down, might disappear.) The Mishnah became the basis of further discussion, which was written down in the form of a "Talmud" (from the word for "learning") by the rabbis of Tiberias ca. 400 AD (the "Palestinian" or "Jerusalem" Talmud), and in greater expansion by Babylonian sages ca. 500 AD (the "Babylonian" Talmud). These books of law and lore served to hold the Jewish people together in their Diaspora. Jerusalem Talmud (IV/7,19) mentions a great fair held at a place called Botnah, which means terebinth. It was the biggest fair in the land, said the Rabbis, bigger than the ones at Acco and Gaza. They advised Jews not to attend, because idolatrous practices were rampant. This was probably the same place that Byzantine writers called Terebinthus, where a great tree stood and where an annual pagan fair was held in the summer. They are the first, apparently, to use the name Mamre as an alternative for Terebinthus. The tree would have attracted them, for reasons we shall see.

We have a detailed description of the fair from Sozomen of Gaza. Writing in the 5th century, he describes the pagan activities, which were accompanied by "hilarity." The Emperor Constantine the Great (280? – 337AD). In 312 AD, he received, he believed, the help of the Christian God at a crucial battle, thus becoming ruler of the Roman empire's western half. A year later, in the Edict of Milan, he legalized Christianity. By 324 he ruled the Empire's eastern half as well. In 326 his immensely popular, 72-year-old mother Helena made a journey to the Holy Land, establishing the trend of Christian pilgrimage and – through her discovery of the true cross – founding the science of archaeology. With her son's support, she erected churches. In 330, having built up the ancient city of Byzantium as his

new capital, Constantine renamed it Constantinople and dedicated it to the God of the Christians, whom he seems to have confused with himself. He delayed becoming a Christian till his last illness: few Christians then believed in post-baptismal forgiveness for serious sins. [Constantine] forbade them, he tells us, and ordered that a church be built on the spot. Sozomen begins in the present tense but shifts to the past, so it is unclear whether, despite the decree, the hilarity continued.

I consider it necessary to detail the proceedings of Constantine in relation to what is called the oak of Mature [sic]. This place is now called Terebinthus, and is about fifteen stadia distant from Hebron, which lies to the south, but is two hundred and fifty stadia distant from Jerusalem. It is recorded that here the Son of God appeared to Abraham, with two angels, who had been sent against Sodom, and foretold the birth of his son. Here the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine the Phoenicians, and the Arabians, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast; and many others, both buyers and sellers, resort thither on account of the fair. Indeed, this feast is diligently frequented by all nations: by the Jews, because they boast of their descent from the patriarch Abraham; by the Pagans, because angels there appeared to men; and by Christians, because He who for the salvation of mankind was born of a virgin, afterwards manifested Himself there to a godly man. This place was moreover honored fittingly with religious exercises. Here some prayed to the God of all; some called upon the angels, poured out wine, burnt incense, or offered an ox, or he-goat, a sheep, or a cock. Each one made some beautiful product of his labor, and after carefully husbanding it through the entire year, he offered it according to promise as provision for that feast, both for himself and his dependents. And either from honor to the place, or from fear of Divine wrath, they all abstained from coming near their wives, although during the feast these were more than ordinarily studious of their beauty and adornment. Nor, if they chanced to appear and to take part in the public processions, did they act at all licitiously. Nor did they behave imprudently in any other respect, although the tents were contiguous to each other, and they all lay promiscuously together. The place is open country, and arable, and without houses, with the exception of the buildings around Abraham's old oak and the well he prepared. No one during the time of the feast drew water from that well; for according to Pagan usage, some placed burning lamps near it; some poured out wine, or cast in cakes; and others, coins, myrrh, or incense. Hence, as I suppose, the water was rendered useless by commixture with the things cast into it. Once whilst these customs were being celebrated by the Pagans, after the aforesaid manner, and as was the established usage with hilarity, the mother-in-law of Constantine was present for prayer, and apprised the emperor of what was being done... [Sozomen, Book II, Chapter IV]

The sediment of the well yielded up, in fact, more than a thousand coins (mostly from the time of Constantine), as well as pottery and lamps.

The sacrificial altar was probably in the middle, where a black segment appears in the diagram above. Here were found metal bells, rings, earrings, pieces of crystal, animal bones and a great many rooster feet. The rooster was holy to Hermes-Mercury, who was not only the messenger but also the god of commerce. An inscription honoring him turned up as well. (Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II. Keel, p. 713.)

 Elsewhere in the enclosure, a smashed (!) head of Dionysus-Bacchus was found. This is significant, for one may well ask, Why should the biggest annual fair in the country - bigger than those in Acco or Gaza - be here, off the beaten track of antiquity? The answer may be "Wine!", for which this area was so famous. The only comfortable road from the west, through the straight Wadi Kof, led directly up to this site, which was cooler than the lowlands in summer. So this would have been the natural place for an annual drinking party.

The road up Wadi Kof, in fact, connected the An area of low hills and valleys between the Judean mountain range

and the Mediterranean coast. It includes (from north to south) Beit Shemesh, the Valley of Elah (where David encountered Goliath), Maresha a.k.a. Beit Guvrin and Lachish. Shephelah with this part of the mountain range. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, both these areas were mainly inhabited by Edomites (Idumeans). This fact heightens the possible significance of one small find: a stone altar containing the name Cos, inscribed in Greek. Cos was the chief Edomite god. Here, perhaps, we have a clue to the enclosure's original function. Already in the Hellenistic period, there may have been a tree cult here that the Edomites associated with their god. After the Hasmoneans annexed the area, most Edomites converted to Judaism, but they retained their ethnic identity and their desire for independence. For example, Herod, himself an Edomite, had an Edomite brother-in-law named Costobar (a name formed from that of the god). We read in Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus' (*Antiquities of the Jews*, translated by William Whiston) *Antiquities* XV 7, 9):

Costobarus was an Idumean by birth, and one of principal dignity among them, and one whose ancestors had been priests to the Koze, whom the Idumeans had esteemed as a god; but after Hyrcanus had made a change in their political government, and made them receive the Jewish customs and law, Herod made Costobarus governor of Idumea and Gaza, and gave him his sister Salome to wife; ... When Costobarus had gotten to be so highly advanced, it pleased him and was more than he hoped for, and he was more and more puffed up by his good success, and in a little while he exceeded all bounds, and did not think fit to obey what Herod, as their ruler, commanded him, or that the Idumeans should make use of the Jewish customs, or be subject to them.

Josephus goes on to list Costobar's treasons, for which Herod executed him. It is tempting to think that the inconsistent pattern we have seen in the building of the enclosure, and the premature termination of the Herodian phase, may reflect the ups and downs of Herod's relations with his fellow Edomites. One can invent hypotheses. For example (following a suggestion by Itzhak Magen, "Elonei Mamre: Atar Pulhan Miyamei Hordus" ("The Oaks of Mamre: A Cultic Site from the time of Herod"), in *Qadmoniot* 24:46-55, 1991. Magen 54-55), perhaps, in order better to integrate the Edomites with the rest of the Jewish people, Herod decided to ignore the problem of the distance and to turn their sacred tree into an Abraham shrine. Abraham and Sarah, after all, were ancestors of the Edomites, as was the son God had promised them under the tree. (If it was Herod who connected the site to Abraham, the tree may have been the one mentioned by Josephus, although the distance he gives is off by more than a mile.)

To complete this survey of the site in the Roman period: Jerome (a.k.a. Hieronymus) (ca. 347 – 420 AD), the learned Church father (and favorite saint of Christian painters after the Holy Family), spent the last 34 years of his life in Bethlehem, where he translated both the Hebrew First Testament and the Greek Second Testament into Latin, the so-called "Vulgate." It remained the authoritative version of the Bible for Western Christendom for a thousand years. He took part in the great theological controversies of his day, and his influence was tremendous. From what remains of his vast correspondence, he appears to have kept his faith at the cost of struggle with his own impulses; his bitter, combative disposition (perhaps a result of that struggle) often seems far from the teachings of tolerance found in Jesus, Paul and Origen. Jerome, relying on a Roman source, reports that after quelling the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 AD, Publius Aelius Hadrianus (76 – 138 AD). Roman emperor from 117 until his death. He quelled the Bar Kokhba revolt, the second major Jewish uprising in the land. After banishing the Jews from Jerusalem, he rebuilt the city, naming it Aelia Capitolina. He is also remembered as the builder of Hadrian's Wall in northern England. Hadrian led a multitude of Jewish captives to the market at Terebinthus (which Jerome also calls Mamre) and there sold them as slaves (In *Zachariam* 111, 11, 4-5).

The site in the Byzantine period

Where Mamre was concerned, the Byzantines would have been more interested in the tree of Genesis 18 than in the burial cave of Genesis 23. For at this tree the In Genesis 18:1 Yahweh appears to Abraham "by the great tree of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and saw that three men stood opposite him. When he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, 'My lord, if now I have found favor in your [singular in Hebrew] sight, please don't go away from your servant. Now let a little water be fetched, wash your [plural] feet, and rest yourselves [plural] under the tree. I will get a morsel of bread so you can refresh your heart. After that you may go your way, now that you have come to your servant.'" Holy Trinity had

appeared to Abraham. The terebinth at our site was probably the only grand tree in the Hebron area during the early 4th century, when the first Christian pilgrims arrived. It had already reached its apogee and was dead by 361. In translating into Latin (ca. 390 AD) the Onomasticon of Eusebius (ca. 330 AD) and inserting his comments (here in square brackets), Jerome remarked: "Mamre near Hebron, where there is a [very old and of many years] terebinth even now [up to the time of my childhood and the reign of Emperor Constantine] pointed out" (Onomasticon, Section D, under Drus. In Jerome's childhood the emperor was Constantius II, son of Constantine, who ruled until 361 AD).

As far as the evidence goes, the site was first identified as Mamre in the 320's. Constantine's mother-in-law, Eutropia, attended the annual fair. She wrote home complaining about the pagan practices she had witnessed. Eusebius, in his Life of Constantine (Chapters 51-53), reports the response of the Emperor:

But having heard that the self-same Saviour who a while ago had appeared on earth had in ages long since past afforded a manifestation of his Divine presence to holy men of Palestine near the oak of Mamre, he ordered that a house of prayer should be built there also in honor of the God who had thus appeared.

Constantine wrote his bishops in Palestine:

"She assures me, then, that the place which takes its name from the oak of Mamre, where we find that Abraham dwelt, is defiled by certain of the slaves of superstition in every possible way. She declares that idols which should be utterly destroyed have been erected on the site of that tree; that an altar is near the spot; and that impure sacrifices are continually performed."

He ordered that the altar be demolished and that a church be built. Soon after these orders were carried out, the anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux (333 AD) passed by:

From thence to Bethasora [Beth Zur], 14 miles. There is the fountain in which Philip baptized the eunuch. Thence to the Terebinthus, 8 miles. Here Abraham dwelt, and dug a well under a terebinth tree, and spoke with angels, and ate food with them. Here a basilica of wondrous beauty has been built by the command of Constantine. From Terebinthus to Hebron, 2 miles. Here is a monument of square form built of stone of wondrous beauty, in which lie Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sara, Rebecca, and Leah.

(At last someone mentions the Hebron temenos!)

The outlines of Constantine's church can be seen today (although J. Wilkinson thinks they are Crusader). While it occupied the width of the temenos (48.5 meters), it was remarkably short in length (20 meters). The reason, perhaps, was to avoid interfering with the tree.

Were the Byzantines troubled by the two miles separating their Mamre from the burial cave in Hebron? Apparently not,

for they built a church into the Hebron temenos too. With a huge empire at their disposal, and accustomed to travel great distances, two miles may have seemed a trifle to them. For here, after all, they had a grand tree.

{mospagebreak title=David's Hebron}

The Hebron of David

and later...

After the death of Saul, the land lay open and vulnerable to the Philistines. David was their vassal, ruling Ziklag on the northwest fringe of the Negev. Now that his own people were in need of defense, he...

„,inquired of Yahweh, saying, “Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?” Yahweh said to him, “Go up.” David said, “Where shall I go up?” He said, “To Hebron.”

So David went up there, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the wife of Nabal the Carmelite.

cb(2,3); David brought up his men who were with him, every man with his household. They lived in the cities of Hebron.

cb(2,4); The men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. [2 Samuel 2:1-4]

Hebron was the natural choice for a rebellious vassal who needed to build a power base. Hailing from Judah, David would have wanted to establish himself on that tribe's mountain. His home town of Bethlehem was too vulnerable. Its hill lacked a spring. The Philistines or the other Israelite tribes could mass on the Benjamin plateau and attack from the north. The Philistines had little trouble, apparently, in {jtips2} 2 Samuel 5: 17-18. When the Philistines heard that they had anointed David king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to seek David; and David heard of it, and went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines had come and spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim. |reaching the Valley of Rephaim{/jtips2} between Jebusite Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Hebron was much stronger. To see why, please go to our first page on Hebron, which gives the geographical logic behind David's ascent to "the cities of Hebron."

He brought his wives and militia, but there is no record of his having had to conquer it. Most likely, its residents preferred a strong ruler from their own tribe over the weak successor of Saul the Benjaminite. After the disaster that had befallen the army of Israel, the Judahites, like everyone else, would have felt threatened by the Philistines. What is more, David likely had alliances in the area by marriage: his wives were from Carmel and Jezreel, both of them {jtips2}Joshua 15: 20, 48, 54-56. This is the inheritance of the tribe of the children of Judah according to their families....In the hill country Kiriath Arba (the same is Hebron), and ...Maon, Carmel, Ziph, Jutah, Jezreel, Jokdeam, Zanoah|locations in the Hebron region{/jtips2}.

In his mountain bastion, David spent seven and a half years accumulating power. When we look at the tell, using the sparse excavations to estimate where the walls would have been, we may wonder at the smallness of the "city."

According to the most recent excavator, Avi Ofer, "Hebron," *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Jerusalem, 1993. Avi Ofer, Hebron was the major city in the area during the 2000 – 1550 BC Middle Bronze Age. A massive "cyclopean" wall from this time can still be seen at places on the tell. After the turmoil of 1550 BC, when the Egyptians drove out the Hyksos and ravaged the land, Hebron underwent a decline, as did the rest of the highlands. There are no finds for the 1550 – 1200 BC Late Bronze Age except nearby cemeteries used by nomads. The city revived in the 11th century, however, probably when the Calebites took over. Judging from his finds, Ofer believes that Hebron had its "golden era" in the 10th century, which would fit its function as David's capital.

Ofer believes (1) that the strong walls from Middle Bronze II continued in use during David's time, protecting the upper part of the city, but (2) that the city extended beyond them. To confirm these points, more work is required. In any case, we should recall that in the First Testament period a city on a hill was the hub of a wider metropolitan area. For every person living inside, there would have been another ten or so living in nearby villages, producing food to support the urban aristocrat and themselves.

David's main concern at first was not with the Philistines, rather with the remnant of the Israelite forces under Saul's son, Ishbosheth, whose army was headed by Abner. After both were murdered, the northern tribes found themselves leaderless. There was nothing to stop the Philistines from dominating, say, the Jezreel Plain or the valley at Shechem, cutting them off from each other. Under the old system from the period of the judges, the tribes should have waited for God to call up a leader, granting him charisma to unite them against the enemy. But this wouldn't work against the Philistines, who were better organized, faster and more mobile than the Canaanite city-states. That was why the tribes had taken Saul as their first human king, and it was why they now went to David in Hebron.

The elders asked David to make a compact with them, under whose terms he would rule them as king. In the Ancient Near East, a king was not normally bound by a compact to his people; he was above the law by which he ruled them (Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II. Keel, pp. 677-78). The tribes' insistence on a compact would have been a vestige from the older system, under which each of them had retained a large measure of independence.

As a capital from which to rule all the tribes, Hebron would have been too far south. So David set his sights on Jebusite Jerusalem, a decision we've discussed there. He conquered it and made it his capital, gaining a foothold on the Benjamin Plateau. Then he attempted to consolidate his kingdom according to his own standards of efficiency, ignoring the compact with the tribes. This act fueled the first great rebellion against him, led by Absalom his son. Absalom had been born in Hebron and could take it as his base, for the city no doubt resented its loss of status to Jerusalem.

After Solomon's death and the split in the kingdom, the data become thin. Enough exists, however, to indicate that Hebron continued to function until the Babylonian invasion of 586 BC and even later. Of special interest from the reign of Hezekiah are five jar handles throughout the territory of Judah, archaeologists have discovered hundreds of jar handles bearing the inscription, "For the King" (lamelekh), followed by the name Hebron or Soco or Zif or Mamshit. All were made of the same kind of clay, probably in one place. Some bear the image of a scarab, others of the sun with wings. All date from Hezekiah's reign. The jars would have contained wine, grain and oil. These provisions would have been collected at the four named places, then packed in the jars and distributed. What was the purpose of this system? Many of the jar inscriptions included private names, and this may be a partial clue. It was the practice in Assyria to pay royal functionaries with wine and grain. Hezekiah perhaps copied this. That would explain why so many handles were found in the three cities of royal residence: Jerusalem, Ramat Rahel, and Lachish. When Hezekiah prepared his revolt against Assyria, he perhaps adapted this system in order to store provisions in the towns of Judah, for he knew they would be under siege. Jar handles inscribed "For the King," two including the name "Hebron." This was one of four Judean

towns appointed to collect provisions in such jars. Clearly, it was in the grip of Jerusalem.

In 539 BC Babylon fell to Cyrus of Persia. Throughout the Persian period (that is, until 332 BC) Hebron was empty. No finds have turned up on the tell or in the valley below. Instead, there was habitation on the next hill to the north at a place called the Ruin of Nimra (Mamre?).

By the fifth century, the Edomites had become the dominant group in the area. The Persians organized their lands as the province of Idumea.

Hebron re-emerged as a town in the Hellenistic period, from the conquest by Alexander the Great (332 BC) until the Maccabean revolt, which started in 167 BC and proved successful by 143 BC. It was now in the valley to the east. The population was largely Edomite, as is evident from the many tombstone inscriptions that carry, as a component of the person's name, the syllable -cos. Cos was the chief god of Edom.

Judah Maccabee conquered the region in 160 BC. Half a century later, the Hasmonean John Hyrcanus, Jewish king and high priest, reigned 134-104 BC. He was the son of Simon the Maccabee and the first of the second Hasmonean generation to assume the crown. He defeated the Edomites, giving them a choice of conversion or exile. Among the converts was Antipater, father of Herod the Great. Hyrcanus also defeated the Samaritans, destroying their cities and the temple on Mt. Gerizim. A Hasmonean – later Herodian – fortress in the Judaeian desert was named after him. John Hyrcanus annexed Idumea, and many Edomites converted to Judaism. (Among them was the future Herod's paternal grandfather.) Some of them retained their ethnic identity, however, as well as a desire for independence.