

# The city of Hebron

## 3. From Abraham to Caleb

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*Having looked in the [first article](#) at Hebron as the city of the giants, and in the [second](#) at the names of the city, we now look at Hebron as the city of the patriarchs and the city where the faithful Gentile Caleb had his inheritance.*

**T**HE FIRST MENTION of Hebron in the Bible occurs in the record of when Abraham went to live at Mamre, after separating from Lot: "So Abram moved his tent, and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron" (Gen. 13:18, RSV). The AV translation "plain", in the phrase "plain of Mamre", found here and also in Genesis 14:13 and 18:1, is incorrect. The Hebrew word *'elown* is said to mean 'oaks', 'terebinths' or 'strong trees'. The NIV translates the phrase as "the great trees of Mamre". Mamre is thought to be Ramet el-Khalil, four kilometres (two-and-a-half miles) north of Hebron. It appears that the name Hebron is used in Scripture not only for the town but also for the surrounding district.

### Home of the patriarchs

In Genesis 14:13-16 we read that Abraham rescued Lot from the invading army of Chedorlaomer, using 318 men trained in his own house, together with three Amorite allies. These Amorites were young men (v. 24) named Mamre, Aner and Eshcol. Mamre may have given his name to the

place where Abraham had set up his tent, and perhaps he owned the oaks of Mamre. Since the Amorites and Hittites are spoken of as separate peoples in the next chapter (15:20,21), it would appear most likely that these

Amorites were living in, or adjacent to, a Hittite area. Sometimes the description 'Amorite' may be used as a general term for the inhabitants of Canaan, for example in Genesis 15:16, but probably not in chapter 14.

As pointed out in the introduction to [Part 2](#) of this study, Abraham was probably still living at Mamre when God made His covenant with him, promising him all the land from the River of Egypt to the River Euphrates (15:18-21).

It was also at Mamre that Abraham was visited by the three angels, carrying a message concerning the promise of a son to Sarah and the coming destruction of the cities of the plain (18:1). Hebron is the highest town in the Judean hills, being 927 metres above sea level. This explains why there was a place not far from Abraham's encampment from where he could view the land of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was over 420 metres below sea level (v. 16). These cities are thought to lie beneath the southern end of the Dead Sea, the surface of which is at present about 427 metres below sea level. Abraham would see the smoke ascending in the distance from an area about thirty miles



**The Haram El-Khah at Hebron, built over the supposed site of the Cave of Machpelah, burial place of the patriarchs and their wives.**

(Picture: HolyLandPhotos.org)

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away, and more than four fifths of a mile below his elevation (19:27,28).

Sarah died at Hebron (23:2) and was buried in the cave of Machpelah, which lay “near Mamre” (v. 17, NIV). At that time the resident population, described as “the people of the land” in verse 7, were Hittites. Later, Abraham himself was buried in the cave of Machpelah, as were also Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. Owing to this being the burial place of Abraham, Hebron eventually became one of the sacred cities of Islam, and the Mosque of Abraham was built over the cave of Machpelah.

Both Isaac and Jacob spent time at Hebron after the death of Abraham, for we read that Isaac was dwelling at Mamre when Jacob eventually met him after returning from Padan-Aram: “And Jacob came unto Isaac his father unto Mamre, unto the city of Arbah, which is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac sojourned” (35:27).

### Spying out the Land

Hebron is specifically mentioned as being visited by the twelve leaders sent out by Moses to spy out the Promised Land: “they went up through the South and came to Hebron; Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, were there . . . Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole” (Num. 13:22,23, NKJV). The Valley of Eshcol derives its name from the Hebrew word for ‘cluster’, and is probably located a few kilometres north of Hebron in an area where today vineyards produce grapes noted for their quality.

Whether Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai were famous Anakite chieftains at that time, or the ancestral names for three families living in Hebron, is discussed below. It has been suggested that two of these names are connected with the gigantic stature of the Anakites. Talmai means ‘Furrow’, and could imply that he was as long as a furrow. Ahiman means ‘Who is my brother?’, carrying the import that there was no man who could compare with him in his great stature. The possible meanings of the Anakite names are given in [Table 1](#).

Table 1	
Anakite name	Possible meaning
Anak	Long-necked
Arba	Four, Foursquare
Ahiman	Who is my brother? that is, No one can compare with him
Sheshai	Whitish
Talmai	Furrow, that is, As long as a furrow

### The conquest of Hebron by Joshua

After the destruction of Jericho and Ai, the Israelite army, with the Lord’s help, routed the armies of five southern kings at Gibeon. The five kings, which included Hoham king of Hebron, were slain by Joshua at Makkedah, where they had taken refuge in a cave (Josh. 10:5-27). In the following campaign, to the south of Gibeon, the cities of Hebron and Debir were taken, amongst others, together with their surrounding villages (NIV), and the inhabitants were put to the sword (vv. 36-39). Hebron had by then replaced its king that had been slain at Makkedah (v. 37). However, the Anakites returned and reoccupied these two cities until driven out by Caleb and Othniel at least seven years later (see [Table 2](#)).

In Joshua 10:5 the inhabitants of Hebron are described as Amorites. This could be a general term for the inhabitants of that area of Canaan, or perhaps a mixture of Amorites and Anakites inhabited Hebron at this time, with the Amorites being in the majority. This capture of Hebron

Table 2		
Years after the Exodus	Caleb's age	Event
2	40 (Josh. 14:7)	Spies returned with bad report
40	78	Israelites cross the Jordan
40+		Joshua's southern campaign Hebron and Debir captured by Joshua
40+		Joshua's northern campaign
47	85 (14:10)	Hebron allocated to Caleb (14:13)
47/48?	85/86?	Hebron captured by Caleb, and Debir captured by Othniel (15:13-19)

must have taken place in the first year after the crossing of the Jordan.

Perhaps the reason for God allowing the Anakites (and Amorites?) to return after the first assault on Hebron was so that the land would not become a wilderness before the Israelites multiplied sufficiently to need it for living space. This idea is supported by Exodus 23:29,30: "I will not drive them out from before thee in one year; lest the land become desolate, and the beast of the field multiply against thee. By little and little I will drive them out from before thee, until thou be increased, and inherit the land".

It may be that the summary statement in Joshua 11:21-23 includes the later conquest of Hebron and Debir by Caleb and Othniel discussed in the following section. But either way there was a reoccupation of these cities by the Anakites after the initial attack by Joshua. Were the returning Anakites refugees from Gaza, Gath and Ashdod (v. 22)?

### The conquest of Hebron by Caleb

Seven years after the encouraging words of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy (9:3), Joshua gave Kirjath-Arba to Caleb for an inheritance. At this time, Caleb, at the age of eighty-five (see [Table 2](#)), was still as strong and vigorous for battle as he had been forty-five years earlier when spying out the land (Josh. 14:10-13). Sometime later, but presumably before the death of Joshua as recorded in a later chapter (Judg. 2:8), he captured the city, assisted by the army of Judah, and the three descendants of Anak—Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi—were driven out of the city and slain. Interestingly, these three Anakites were at Kirjath-Arba all those years before, when the report concerning the giant Anakites discouraged the Israelites from attempting the conquest of the Promised Land (Josh. 15:14; Judg. 1:10; Num. 13:22).

A number of questions arise concerning Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi:

- 1 Why are these three Anakites singled out by name when presumably there were large numbers of Anakites occupying the three cities, Hebron, Debir and Anab (Josh. 11:21)? Perhaps they were chieftains of Anakite clans.
- 2 Why are these three spoken of in Joshua 15:14 as being driven out of Hebron by Caleb, rather than just being slain?
- 3 If Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi were important chieftains, how likely is it that they could have held similar positions at Hebron forty-five

years earlier, at the time that the men were sent to spy out the land (Num. 13:22)?

- 4 If these three were men living in the days of Joshua, how had they survived the destruction of the army of the king of Hebron by Joshua (Josh. 10:5-11) and then the subsequent smiting of the city of Hebron by the sword, when "all the souls that were therein" were utterly destroyed (vv. 36,37)?

The most likely explanation that fits the above facts is that Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi were the names of the three clans or families of the Anakites living in Hebron and the surrounding area, rather than the names of three chieftains.

### The typical significance of Caleb inheriting Hebron

Caleb must have been a Gentile, since he was a Kenezite (Josh. 14:6), probably of Canaanite or Edomite origin (Gen. 15:19; 36:15). This explains the comment that Joshua gave him "a share among the children of Judah . . . namely, Kirjath Arba, which is Hebron" (Josh. 15:13, NKJV). His family had been adopted into the tribe of Judah, and he had achieved a sufficient position of importance to be chosen from that tribe to spy out the land (Num. 13:6). As pointed out in [Part 2](#), Hebron means 'Union', so we can see in Caleb's inheritance of Hebron a foreshadowing of Gentiles being united with the promises made to Abraham and so becoming members of the commonwealth of Israel through Jesus Christ of the tribe of Judah (Gal. 3:29; Eph. 2:12,13).

Another type can be seen in the capture of Kirjath Sepher by Caleb's nephew, Othniel (Josh. 15:16,17). This city, which was also a stronghold of the Anakim, was about twelve-and-a-half miles west-south-west of Hebron. The name Kirjath Sepher means 'Book city', and Othniel's name means 'Lion of God'. Othniel of the tribe of Judah was also the first judge and deliverer of Israel (Judg. 3:9). As such he foreshadowed Jesus Christ. Just as Othniel prevailed to open up Kirjath Sepher, so has "the Lion of the tribe of Juda" prevailed to open the book (scroll) with seven seals so that the Revelation from God might be made known to his faithful followers (Rev. 5:1-5; 1:1).

Kirjath Sepher was later called Debir, a name meaning 'Oracle' in the sense of 'Inner sanctuary'. The word *debir* is used eleven times in 1 Kings 6-8 for the most holy place in Solomon's temple; see, for example, 6:5,16,19,20, etc., and the marginal comment against verse 5 in the NKJV. Othniel's

conquest of Debir can therefore be seen as a type of the Lord Jesus Christ's conquest of sin in the flesh that enabled him to enter into the antitypical most holy place, heaven itself:

"Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood he entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12, NKJV);

"For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (v. 24, NKJV; cf. 6:19,20).

An interesting connection between Hebron (a city of refuge) and Debir (the inner sanctuary) can be seen by considering verse 18 together with verses 19 and 20 of Hebrews 6. This will be dealt with more fully in the [next article](#).

### **An exhortation to us**

The experiences of the Israelites in their wilderness wandering provide important lessons for us: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition . . . Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:11,12, NKJV). They lacked the faith that God would enable them to overcome the giants who inhabited the high-walled cities in the Land of Promise. Only Joshua and Caleb exhibited the quality of faith that pleased God. The rest did not believe that God could and would fulfil His promise to give them the Land. As such they denied the glory of God, forgetting His marvellous works in the land of Egypt:

"How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and *limited the Holy One of Israel*. They did not remember His power: the day when He redeemed them

from the enemy, when He worked His signs in Egypt, and His wonders in the field of Zoan" (Ps. 78:40-43, NKJV);

"Then they *despised the pleasant land*; they did not believe His word, but complained in their tents, and did not heed the voice of the LORD. Therefore He raised His hand in an oath against them, to overthrow them in the wilderness" (Ps. 106:24-26, NKJV).

However, in spite of the Israelites' failure to give God the glory due because of their fear and unbelief, His purpose would not fail. All those men who had seen God's glory in Egypt and in the wilderness would not enter the Land (Num. 14:22,23), "but truly, *as I live*, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD" (v. 21, NKJV). Their very unbelief and lack of faith had denied that the God of Israel was a living God, but that would not prevent the living God from carrying out His purpose and fulfilling His promises.

So let us take the exhortation to ourselves not to let spiritual and physical obstacles prevent us from entering into the Kingdom of God. We must not let them assume such gigantic proportions that we give up the struggle, for we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). Faith enables us to see beyond the difficulties that lie in the way. For "we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18, NKJV); therefore let us not lose heart (v. 16).

We need to use spiritual weapons in our warfare against the Canaanite giants of our days, "pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4,5, NKJV).

[\(To be concluded\)](#)

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