

# The city of Hebron

## 2. Founding and naming

David Green

*The origin and naming of Hebron presents some problems, which this study attempts to solve.*

**A** BRAHAM, ISAAC and Jacob spent a considerable amount of time in the area around Hebron. However, the reason for Hebron's importance lies more in the fact that it became a symbol of the patriarchs' faith in the promises of God, for there they, together with Sarah, Rebekah and Leah, were buried in the hope of resurrection, that they might inherit those promises. Since no location other than Mamre is mentioned between Genesis 13:18 and 18:1 for Abraham's dwelling, it was probably at Hebron that God made His covenant with Abraham, promising him all the land from the River of Egypt to the River Euphrates (15:18).

### The founding of Hebron

There is a rather puzzling statement in the book of Numbers that Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan (13:22). There is no very obvious reason for this statement by Moses, though the Israelites would be familiar with the area of Zoan since it was the site of the Egyptian plagues, being situated in the northern delta area of Egypt: "Marvellous things did He in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan" (Ps. 78:12; cf. v. 43). Perhaps the statement is meant to imply the superiority of Hebron over Zoan because of its greater age. Hebron, the city of the promises, has a much greater importance to the faithful Israelite than Zoan, the city of the oppression.

A number of commentators think that the comment may possibly refer to the Hyksos invaders of Egypt in the sixteenth century B.C., who founded a dynasty with their capital at Avaris (probably identical with Zoan), where they ruled for 108 years. The Hyksos mostly had Semitic names, Canaanite-style temples and Palestinian-type burials and pottery. They must have entered Egypt through Canaan, and were expelled by the Egyptians into Canaan *circa* 1550 B.C.

Numbers 13:22 probably implies that the same people founded both Hebron and Zoan. Since the same verse refers to the Anakites (Anakim, AV),

were they the founders of both cities? It seems unlikely, since the Anakites were a race of giants, and there is no reported evidence that the Hyksos were of gigantic stature. So we are left with the likely suggestion that Hebron may have been built by a tribe of Semites on their way to the delta.

### The name Kirjath Arba

The book of Joshua informs us that "Hebron used to be called Kiriath Arba after Arba, who was the greatest man among the Anakites" (14:15, NIV), and that Arba was the progenitor (forefather) of the Anakites (15:13; 21:11). Perhaps the city received that name because Arba founded or captured it. On the other hand, the name could have been used because Arba was a famous man who happened to live there.

The name Kirjath (Kiriath) Arba can be translated 'City of Arba', or 'City of the Four', or 'Tetropolis'. It has been suggested that the name Arba, meaning 'four', 'four-sided' or 'square', was given because of this man's "perfection and strength of form". This figurative use of the number four is found later among the Greeks and Romans. A quadrangular stone was used among the Romans as a symbol of wisdom and strength of mind, and the Greeks used the terms *tetragonon soma*, meaning 'perfect body', and *tetragonon andra*, meaning 'perfect man' (compare the English word tetragonal, meaning 'four corners' or 'four angles').

### The name Hebron

Various meanings have been given for the name Hebron: 'union', 'confederation', 'association', 'fellowship', 'communion' or 'alliance'. It has been suggested that the name was given because of Abraham being "confederate" or allied with the Amorites who lived in the area, Mamre, Aner and Eschol (Gen. 14:13). This idea should not be ruled out, even though there is no similarity between the Hebrew spelling of Hebron and the Hebrew words translated "were confederate" in Genesis 14:13. The phrase literally means that these Amorites had a covenant with Abraham, and that does suggest some form of alliance. That

<b>Selected references to Hebron and Kirjath Arba (NKJV)</b>	
Gen. 13:18	Abram . . . dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre, which are in Hebron
Gen. 23:2	So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan
Gen. 23:19	The cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan
Gen. 35:27	Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron)
Josh. 14:15 Judg. 1:10	And the name of Hebron formerly was Kirjath Arba
Josh. 20:7	And Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah

there should be an alliance is both intriguing and puzzling, unless Abraham had converted these Amorites to the one true God.

### **When were these names used?**

When were the names Hebron and Kirjath Arba first used? There are a number of problems that prevent a simple answer being given to this question.

We are twice informed that Kirjath Arba was the former name of Hebron, and once that it was named after a famous Anakite called Arba (Josh. 14:15; Judg. 1:10). So we must accept that the city received the name Hebron after being called Kirjath Arba.

We know that the name Kirjath Arba was used in the days of Abraham, since we are informed that Sarah died there (Gen. 23:2). That being so, why is there no mention of the Anakites being present in that area, but only Amorites and “the children of Heth [Hittites]” (14:13; 23:5)? There appear to be two possibilities. Abraham was concerned with purchasing a burial place from the sons of Heth (v. 3), which was some way outside the city wall. Perhaps the Hittites did not live within the confines of the city, whereas the Anakites were the city dwellers. Alternatively, it may be that the city’s occupants were a mixture of both Anakites and Hittites.

One would expect the inhabitants of Canaan to have used the name Kirjath Arba in the days of Joshua, since the Anakite descendants of Arba were in occupation of the city at that time (Josh. 15:13,14). Yet the name Hebron is used without comment at the time of Joshua’s southern campaign (10:3,23,36). In addition, the king of Hebron is described as an Amorite king (v. 5). Perhaps the

Anakites were not the only inhabitants of Hebron at that time, but only a minority; or could the description ‘Amorite’ be used in a general sense to cover all the inhabitants of Canaan, including the Anakites, as appears to be the case in Genesis 15:16?

It is clear that Moses was familiar with the name Hebron, since he twice refers to it in a straightforward manner (Gen. 13:18; Num. 13:22). Therefore there is no reason to argue, as have some critics, that the explanatory note, “that is Hebron”, found in some passages (see [table](#)) has been added by a later hand. Therefore we must assume that the name Hebron was used before the city was captured in the days of Joshua. But why would this be so when the Anakites were in occupation? Perhaps the city was already known to the Israelites as Hebron at a time when the Anakites still called it Kirjath Arba.

Ellicott in his commentary suggests that, since the literal meaning of Kirjath Arba is ‘City of Four’, and Hebron means ‘Alliance’, it may be that its building was the result of the *union* of four families. Then, later on, Arba became used as a proper name for the famous Anakite who dwelt there. In other words, perhaps Arba derived his name from the city and not the other way round. This suggestion does not necessarily contradict Joshua 14:15, which reads, according to a literal translation, “and the name of Hebron before was City of Arba—that one was a great man among the Anakim” (*The Interlinear Bible*).

Another unanswered question relates to the much later mention of Kirjath Arba in Nehemiah 11:25. Why did Nehemiah use the old Canaanite name instead of the by then well-established name of Hebron?

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