

Biblical Geography, Beersheba Archaeology, and Ebla Tablets Context

Lecture: 02-27 Lecture: Biblical Geography, Beersheba Archaeology, and Ebla Tablets Context | Israel 2026

SITE OVERVIEW

Location: Beersheba (modern name) / Be'er Sheva (ancient/biblical name — “Well of Seven” or “Well of the Oath”)

Date of Visit: February 25, 2026 (two days prior to content creation date of February 27, 2026)

Biblical References:

- Genesis 12 — Abraham introduces Sarah as his sister to Pharaoh
- Genesis 14 — The five cities of the plain
- Genesis 20 — Abraham meets King Abimelech
- Genesis 21 — Abraham trades seven lambs for a well; covenant with King Abimelech; naming of Beersheba
- Genesis 22 — Abraham departs to sacrifice Isaac
- Genesis 26 — Isaac builds an altar commemorating God’s promise

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Beersheba as a Boundary Marker: Dr. Schilling identifies Beersheba as the southern boundary of the land promised to Israel, with Dan (on the Golan) serving as the northern boundary — a span of approximately 30 miles at its narrowest and up to an unspecified maximum

Key Events at This Site:

- Abraham negotiates with King Abimelech over well rights (Genesis 21), offering seven lambs as payment, giving the site its name
- Abraham makes a formal covenant/oath with King Abimelech at this location
- Abraham departs from Beersheba to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22)
- Isaac builds an altar at Beersheba to commemorate God’s covenant promise (Genesis 26)
- Jacob receives a vision at Beersheba before taking his family to Egypt

Time Periods Covered: Patriarchal period (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob narratives)

Historical Figures Associated: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Hagar, King Abimelech, Laban

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The Altar at Beersheba:

- Excavations uncovered stone blocks from a dismantled altar — notably described as “not Jewish-shaped,” consistent with biblical prohibitions against carved/cut stone altars
- The altar’s stones were found scattered and incorporated into other structures; their identification and reconstruction represent a significant find
- A reconstructed version of this altar is displayed at the Israel Museum

The Ebla Tablets (Ebla, Syria):

- Discovered in Ebla, Syria in the 1970s
- A collection of approximately 17,000 cuneiform records — described as primarily municipal/administrative in nature (comparable to courthouse records)
- Written in a Semitic language with connections to Hebrew vocabulary and syntax (flagged as speculative/simplified — exact linguistic relationship noted only briefly by an audience member)

Key Confirmations from the Ebla Tablets:

1. **The Five Cities of the Plain (Genesis 14)** — Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar — are listed in the tablets, predating the Old Testament by approximately 1,500 years, and named in the same order as Genesis 14
2. **Abraham and Hagar narrative** — Tablets contain a legal provision stating that if a wife cannot conceive, she is to give her handmaiden to her husband; the couple then raises the child as their own — confirming this as a culturally normative practice of the period, not a moral aberration
3. **Abraham introducing Sarah as his “sister”** — Tablets illuminate the legal distinction: a wife could be taken by force or by killing the husband, but a “sister” required a formal bride price and agreement between families, making acquisition far more difficult and protecting the woman
4. **Rachel and the family gods (teraphim)** — Tablets confirm that household gods were legally part of the family estate, to be inherited by sons. Possession of the gods conferred inheritance rights, explaining why Rachel took them and why Laban pursued the caravan so urgently

Current Location of Tablets: Dr. Schilling states they are housed in the Istanbul Museum (noted with some uncertainty during the recording)

Ongoing Function of the Well: The well at Beersheba is noted as still functioning today, used by shepherds to water flocks — offering continuity with ancient pastoral practices

DR. SCHILLING'S KEY POINTS

Correcting Misconceptions:

- Abraham's use of Sarah as his "sister" is frequently misread as deception or cowardice without cultural context; the Ebla Tablets clarify this was a legal strategy to protect Sarah by requiring a formal bride-price process before any king could take her
- Hagar's situation has traditionally been read as moral failure on Abraham's part; the Ebla Tablets confirm the practice of surrogate conception via a handmaiden was the culturally expected and legally codified response to barrenness — not a sin by the standards of the period
- The five cities of the plain (Genesis 14) were dismissed by critics as mythological Jewish invention due to the absence of external attestation — the Ebla Tablets directly refute this by naming all five cities in the same sequence

Key Argument — Extrabiblical Validation: Dr. Schilling's central thesis at this session appears to be that the Ebla Tablets provide remarkable external, pre-biblical corroboration for the cultural, legal, and geographical details embedded in the patriarchal narratives

On Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim: Rachel is not portrayed as a thief out of superstition alone; she was operating within a known legal framework where possession of the household gods secured inheritance rights — a rational act of self-protection given her unfamiliarity with Yahweh as a deity (flagged: Dr. Schilling notes Rachel "doesn't know who Yahweh is" and regarded him as merely another regional god — this is a theological interpretive claim)

Recommended Texts for Further Study: Genesis 20 and Genesis 21 — to be re-read with the Ebla Tablet cultural context applied

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Dan to Beersheba: The classic biblical expression of the full extent of the Promised Land; physically spans approximately 30 miles (north-south) at its widest biblical scope as described here — though this figure appears to reflect the narrowest measurement; the full distance from Dan to Beersheba is conventionally cited at approximately 150 miles (flagged: the transcript's reference to "30 miles" as "the longest" is unclear and may reflect a misstatement or refer to a specific regional measurement)

Beersheba's Location: Southern edge of the settled/promised land; situated in the Negev desert fringe

Well Placement: Dr. Schilling notes the well was historically positioned outside the city walls, consistent with the nomadic and semi-nomadic use of the site — shepherds and their flocks would gather at the well on the city's perimeter

Ebla, Syria: Location of the tablet discovery; geographically and culturally distant from Beersheba, yet the tablets' content directly intersects with the biblical patriarchal narratives set in Canaan and Mesopotamia

QUOTABLE MOMENTS

“From here to up on the Golan, up at Dan, was what God promised his people.”

“Critics have suggested that they didn’t even exist... until they found the Ebla tablets — 1,500 years older than the Old Testament. Not only names all five, but names them in the same order Genesis does.”

“We’ve always looked at that nasty Abraham, that sinner, until we found the tablets — and the tablets say, if a wife cannot conceive she’s to give her handmaiden to him... This was the culturally accepted thing to do. It was not sin.”

“If you wanted to elevate the position of your wife, you called her a sister... because there has to be a bride price, there has to be an agreement on both sides of the families.”

“She doesn’t know who Yahweh is. She just thinks he’s another regional god.”

PERSONAL NOTES

Follow-up Questions:

- Confirm the precise current location of the Ebla Tablets — Dr. Schilling mentioned Istanbul Museum, but this should be verified; scholarly sources typically reference the Idlib Museum (Syria) and various international institutions
- Clarify the “30 miles” geographic claim — conventional Dan-to-Beersheba distance is significantly greater; this may have been a reference to width rather than length of the territory
- The linguistic connection between the Ebla script and Hebrew mentioned by an audience member deserves further investigation — what specific conclusions have scholars drawn?
- Dr. Schilling references “Genesis 22” in connection with Jacob’s vision to go to Egypt — this appears to be a potential misstatement; the vision of Jacob/Israel at Beersheba before the descent to Egypt is recorded in Genesis 46:1–4, not Genesis 22 (which is the Akedah/binding of Isaac narrative). Flag for clarification.
- The altar reconstruction on display at the Israel Museum — confirm exhibition details and current display status
- Research the Ebla Tablets discovery more thoroughly: excavation led by Paolo Matthiae (University of Rome) beginning in 1964, with the major tablet archive found in 1974–1975 — cross-reference Dr. Schilling’s “1970s” date