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# DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NEGEV\*

BY PROFESSOR NORMAN BENTWICH, O.B.E., M.C.

Lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on May 19, 1954, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., in the chair, and since brought up to date.

The CHAIRMAN: Professor Bentwich has very kindly come here today and I think he is probably known to everybody here. His distinguished career has been too long for me to recite, but it has included important legal appointments in both Palestine and Egypt and lecturer on international law. He was editor of a review and the writer of countless books. Professor Bentwich knows more about the subject on which he is going to talk than probably anybody else here, and I shall not delay you further but ask him to address us.

## THE NEGEV OF ISRAEL

**M**ORE than half the territory of Israel, and nearly half the area of Palestine west of the Jordan, is the arid region called the Negev. That is a Hebrew word meaning both South and arid, or parched. Mr. Philby has written recently from Mecca to question that interpretation and suggests that the Negev is the name of a region. No doubt the name was applied in the Bible particularly to the dry region of Canaan (the Land of Israel) which extends from Beersheba southwards to the peninsula of Sinai.

In the division of the Mandated country of Palestine between Israel and the Arab State, which was made by the Assembly of the United Nations in 1947, the Negev was allotted to Israel, with the exception of a small strip of twenty miles along the Mediterranean coast from Gaza to the Egyptian frontier. That strip is today occupied by the Egyptians and 200,000 Arab refugees. The Negev is Israel's main land reserve for settlement of immigrants on the soil. It is the one part of her territory which gives a sense of spaciousness. Today a large part of it is empty. It is a pearl-shaped triangle of territory on the north-eastern side of the Sinai peninsula, stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the shore of the Gulf of Akaba which runs up from the Red Sea. At the Gulf four States meet within a semicircle of twenty miles. They are Israel and Egypt on the western side; the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Saudi Arabia on the eastern. A town of Akaba, or Elath—its Biblical name—has been an important place of maritime and trans-desert trade from Bible times. The strong kings of Judah, Solomon, Jehosaphat and Uzziah, had at Elath the port whence their ships set out for Ophir, the land of the Queen of Sheba. Here, centuries later, the Maccabean kings had their outlet to the sea. Here, also in the early centuries of the Christian era, the Romans, renaming it Aila, had their port for triremes and galleys sailing the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. And here, one thousand years later, the Crusaders launched their galleys, to fight the Saracen corsairs. When the Christians were expelled, the place became an important station for the Moslem pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Romans called this part of their eastern provinces Arabia Petraea, or Stony Arabia. They stationed at Akaba (Aila) a legion to impose peace on the tribes of the desert. In their day the northern part of the Negev was

\* See illustration facing p. 113.

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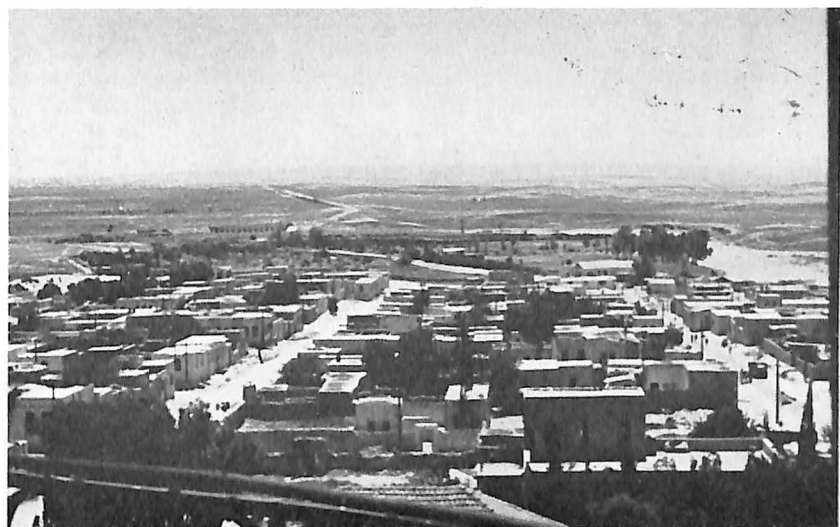
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BEER-SHEBA



BEER-SHEBA, NEW GOVERNMENT HOUSING PROJECT

*See "Developments in the Negev", p. 176.*

populous. They built there one of the main trading highways of the Empire, to link Syria and Arabia with Egypt and North Africa, and along the road were townships whose inhabitants brought the arid land into cultivation, by making reservoirs and cisterns to store the water. The problem of cultivation in the Negev has always been how to store water in the short rainy season of winter so as to cultivate the soil during the dry months of the year, and supply the needs of a settled population. When a strong power has ruled the area, that problem has been solved. The remains of the Roman and Byzantine cities—represented today by the impressive ruins of Esbeita, Abda, Asluj, and others—bear witness to their achievement. When there has been no strong power, the Nomad Arabs from the Desert, the Bedouin, have grazed their camels and herds on the sparse cultivation, and the invading sands have overwhelmed and filled up the cisterns and the reservoirs. The Bedu, it is said, is not only the child but also the father of the Desert.

In the years immediately before the first World War, two young British Archæologists, (Colonel) T. E. Lawrence and (Sir) Leonard Woolley, under the direction of the veteran Col. Newcome, explored the Negev. Both were destined to gain great fame, one as the hero of the Arab revolt in the Desert, the other as the excavator of Chaldea, Antioch and other famous sites of antiquity. The Negev was part of the wilderness of Zin, the land of the wanderings of the Children of Israel when they came out of Egypt. They described the Biblical sites, which still often keep their Bible names, and they described also the monasteries and convents, which had been scattered over the area in the early centuries of the Christian era. In one of the ruined cities alone they estimated that ten thousand people may have lived in an age when material wants were small, and men's thoughts were centred on religious exercises. A later expedition of archæologists, in the period between the wars, brought back a hoard of literary records of the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era. They were in the form of papyrus rolls, and they throw a vivid light on the legal and social conditions of the time.

In recent years the Negev has been more thoroughly explored by Professor Glueck, who was Director of the American School of Oriental Studies in Jerusalem, and surveyed the country east of Jordan and identified scores of Biblical sites. He has traced at least fifty inhabited places of the early centuries of the Christian era and shown that the inhabitants were skilled farmers and water engineers. He identified these settlers with the Nabateans from across Jordan. They built terraces and canalized the slender rainfall from the slopes to the terraces. In this way they made the desert blossom so that it provided sustenance for a large population. Well guarded highways linked the settlements, and on some of them Roman milestones have been found.

The Negev is one of the man-made deserts which negligence has multiplied in the Middle East. An area of an industrious population of cultivators in antiquity became a barren and empty waste. It was a glaring example of how a few inches of soil determine civilization. The epoch of the Crusaders brought a temporary revival. The Frank knights, like the Romans, were concerned to keep open the routes between Egypt and Syria

and between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. They were strong rulers, built castles on the high places, and restored the cisterns and the cultivation. In the sixteenth century the Ottoman conquerors, having extended their way to the Red Sea, rebuilt the Crusader fortress of Akaba, and Sultan Salim left his stamp upon it.

The Negev itself was desolate and derelict, occupied only by a few nomad tribes. It remained so till the end of the nineteenth century. Then the Turks made Beersheba, which in Bible times was an important place because of its wells, again a centre of the nomad tribes. The wells, by which the patriarch Abraham pitched his tent, were apparently inexhaustible. Beersheba was the one town in Palestine which was planned in a modern way. At the beginning of the century German engineers laid it out with parallel streets. It had a mosque, a serai, a school, a courthouse and a municipal garden.

In the first World War when the Turks allied themselves with the Germans, Beersheba was a base of operations for their attack on the Suez canal and the British Army defending it. The Turks advanced their railway into the heart of the Negev, some fifty miles south of Beersheba, to a ruined Byzantine town now known as Auja Hafir. Amid the fallen pillars and the relics of ancient churches they built railway sheds, a market, a hospital and a school; and a monumental column records their exploit. Their army of invasion advanced to the Canal in 1915, and again in 1916; but was repelled. The embankment of the railway and bridges half destroyed by British bombers bear witness to the outburst of activity. In 1948 military activity was renewed around this post, when the Israel Army, which had driven the Egyptians out of the northern section of the Negev, threatened to advance across the Egyptian frontier line. At the bidding of the Security Council of the United Nations, however, they called a halt; the area was demilitarized, and Auja Hafir was left in Israel's possession.

During the thirty years of the British Mandate, Beersheba kept its place as the centre of administration of the Negev; and it was also the seat of tribal courts, composed of Sheikhs, who judged the cases of the nomad Arabs according to their customs. The number of the Bedouin in the Negev in those days was estimated at 60,000. But the effect of firm rule and the growing prosperity of the country was to induce many tribal Arabs to give up wandering and turn to regular cultivation.

Since the creation of the State of Israel, Beersheba has become a more important town than it ever was in the past. It is the administrative centre and the market place of the whole Negev. Its former Arab inhabitants have departed; but already it has a population of nearly twenty thousand Jews from many countries, and the number grows each month. A glass industry and factories for pottery and plastics and sanitary equipment, which use local raw materials, have been planted there. Some of the Bedouin Arabs, who previously were the main population, have permanent encampments in the neighbourhood, and come to the market with their camels. But the undulating plain that stretches away for miles is now sown with Jewish agricultural villages which are introducing modern scientific methods. They dam the flood waters that descend from the mountains in the few days of heavy winter rains, so as to conserve a part

and to be able to irrigate their fields in the dry season. Larger irrigation schemes are being undertaken. Pipes have been laid from the coastal plain, where artesian wells tap the subterranean waters.

A much more daring venture, which must await for its execution some agreement between Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan, is to lead the waters of the Jordan and its tributaries by canals to the arid southern plain. Mr. Johnston, the emissary of President Eisenhower, is trying to negotiate it. Meantime, a hopeful experiment is being carried out by the Israel Institute of Scientific Research—named after the late President, Dr. Weizmann—for de-salting the brackish water, which is found in plenty under the surface of the Negev. The man-made desert may be unmade by scientific skill. Another experiment is to condense the moisture in the air by mounds of pebbles which make tiny catchment areas, so that, in the Bible phrase, they “turn flints into fountains of water.” In the winter of 1951-52, an area of two hundred thousand acres in the Negev was sown with grain, and yielded a harvest of seventy-five thousand tons.

It was only in 1943 that the Jewish Agency began to plant Jewish villages in Negev. It started with three experimental points. Three years later, it carried out a bold operation, planting simultaneously in one day eleven settlements each with its water-tower and its stockade. Today more than fifty co-operative villages and collective farms are established, and a fertile belt is extended each year. The settlers come from all parts of the world, and Greater Beersheba is a cosmopolitan town. French is commonly heard in the streets because many of the settlers have come from French North Africa.

In the first years of the State the population of the town consisted mainly of the soldiers' garrison and the camp followers. After that, however, the big immigration to Israel, particularly from the oriental countries, brought rapid increase to the civilian inhabitants. There was for a time no permanent housing for the immigrants; the old streets of houses and shops were occupied by the first-comers, and a vast temporary village of tin huts and of tents, the “maabara” as it is called, spread around the town. So it was in 1950, 1951, and 1952. But the central Government and a dynamic Mayor set about building a greater Beersheba, having as their target a town of 50,000 inhabitants. In the last two years permanent housing has been built for almost all the civil population. The maabara, which at one time held 5,000, has today a remnant of a few hundred.

The expansion of new Beersheba has been well planned. Each housing quarter is laid out with regard to the contours of the ground; and in the formerly treeless plain woodland and gardens are planted. A small-holder settlement, where each householder has a quarter-acre of garden and adobe house, is rising in the suburbs. An industrial zone, aligned by the northern road that leads towards Hebron, and well away from the residential quarters, has a plant for chemical industry on a big scale employing 300 workers, a brewery, and a depot for the mining enterprises that are extracting the copper and prospecting for petrol in the Negev. If the mining and industrial hopes are realized, Beersheba may be a big manufacturing city during the next decade, the Sheffield of Israel.

Not less remarkable than the industrial and mining development is the

cultural. A sense of community is built up in the motley population. The town already boasts the best-designed House of Culture in the land, primarily used as a cinema, but designed also for concerts, lectures and conferences; and is said to have, too, the best bookshop in Israel. One of the first things done by the Military Government in 1949 was to fashion an open amphitheatre on a rise in the midst of the town for concerts and lectures. Now that is superseded by the House, which seats 1,200. The House was inaugurated in September, 1953 when the archaeologists of Israel held their annual conference. Archaeology is a passion and a pastime of the general populace as well as a profession of the scholars; and the conference brought together thousands of the agricultural settlers and town workers. One outcome was to found a museum of the antiquities and history of the Negev, in Beersheba. The region is rich in the record of the past, from the Age of the Patriarchs to the Era of the Crusaders. The 4,000-year story is skilfully displayed in the Museum placed in the former Mosque. Pottery, coins, glass vases, jewellery, Hebrew, Nabatean and Greek inscriptions, and craft objects of the Arab and Bedouin culture are exhibited. Another part of the Museum is given up to botanical, geological and other collections of the nature of the region.

Few, if any, of the former Arab inhabitants are permanent residents in the city. But 16,000 Bedouin live in the territory of Israel, almost all of them in the region. They come to the market with their camels; and their Arab keffiyeh and their flowing "burnous" bring a picturesque touch. Some come to see the Government doctor who before the World War was a practitioner in Cairo and has a thorough knowledge of Arabic. Four clinics for Arabs have been opened by the Government in different villages.

The materials for Beersheba's industries of glass, pottery and plastics are near at hand in the central Negev. In that amazing landscape, which looks like a range of mountains of the moon, there are vast deposits of phosphate rock, glass-sands and ceramic clays. They are mingled together at and around a place called Machtsh, the Great Crater, which fits the Bible description: "The foundations of the world were laid bare and the earth was rocked and cleaved asunder." It is a sudden gash in the hills, with the shape of a gigantic oval, produced by some primeval disturbance. The phosphate deposits and the clays are being worked on a considerable scale.

Another place of scenic grandeur in the Central Negev became notorious recently because Arabs ambushed there a bus travelling from Elath and killed the passengers. It is a high point on the road, commanding the descent from the plateau to the Araba plain below sea-level. It preserves its Biblical name Ma'alal Akrabim, meaning the ascent of the scorpions. From it you survey the whole mysterious waste between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Akaba. On the top of the pass are the remains of a fortress which the Romans built to guard the road.

Mr. Ben Gurion, who was Prime Minister of Israel and Minister of Defence from the Declaration of Independence in May 1948 till December 1953, and then insisted on giving up political office because he was spiritually weary, retired to a small collective settlement in this arid part of the Central Negev. It is about 20 miles south of Beersheba, and is called S'deh

Boker, meaning Cowboy's Meadow. There he lives with his wife in a prefabricated hut, sharing the life of the Kibbutz, and spending part of the day in manual work. He has taken with him some of his library of philosophy, and the Greek and Latin classics. His purpose is to refresh body and mind, and then return with a fresh message to his people. From his retreat he sends rousing calls to the people in Israel and to the Jewish communities outside. And his example of a pioneer life in the Negev is in itself a clarion call to the youth.\*

Beersheba is connected by a finely engineered motor road with the Southern end of the Dead Sea, where the principal plant of the Potash enterprise, now half nationalized, has taken the place of the wrecked plant at the Northern end of the Sea in Arab territory. The lorry loads pass through Beersheba to a new railway terminal of Migdal Ascalon, on the site of the Philistine town by the Mediterranean. Soon the Lydda-Beersheba railway, which the Turks laid for strategic reasons, and the British improvidently removed, will be restored. Another trunk road, under construction with kaolin, which is also dug from the Crater, will link Beersheba with Israel's outlet on the Gulf of Akaba, Elath, and will open up communication with the copper mines of King Solomon.

Many are beguiled by the Bible phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" to regard the chief town of the Negev as the land's end of Israel. It is, in fact, almost the geographical centre, although much of the 150 miles which stretch from it to the Gulf of Akaba is today a wilderness. Each year, however, marks an increasing penetration of that arid waste, partly by mining exploitation, partly by agricultural settlement. A geological-botanical museum at Beersheba illustrates the scientific advance that is designed to reclaim the area.

The area of the Central and Southern Negev is rich in the heavier minerals. It is, in the words of the Bible, "a land whose stores are iron, and out of whose hills you dig copper." This was the region of King Solomon's Mines: and the smelting ovens of the copper and iron, which the King worked with slave-labour, are traced on several of the hill-tops. The smelting ovens were a regular refinery of ancient days. The site was chosen where the north wind, blowing down from the Dead Sea and the Araba, was strongest. And flues were constructed above the hearth on the principle of the blast furnace. Intense heat must have been generated for this smelting. Today, at Elath, windmills have been erected with a purpose of generating electricity by the power of the northern winds.

Before the first World War American engineers were prospecting in this region for petroleum. It has been proved to exist, but has not yet been worked commercially. The first drilling was made in the autumn of 1953. If oil is found in commercial quantity, one of Israel's major economic problems will be solved.

The principal port for the minerals extracted in the Negev will be a new Elath on the Western shore. At the head of the Red Sea Fjord, Elath is Israel's window to the Orient, as Haifa is her window to the Mediterranean and the West. Archaeologists, excavating mounds by the Gulf and the township, have identified King Solomon's haven of Etzion Geber—

\* Mr. Ben Gurion has since returned to political office.

meaning the Spine of the Giant. The haven took its name from the rocky crags that come down to the sea.—We may compare the Giant's Causeway in Ireland.—It is within a few miles of the new harbour, at present a jetty, which Israel is planning to build, and which may one day be a second Aden.

Near Elath, in what was part of a howling wilderness, Jewish pioneers have begun to cultivate the soil. Two experimental farms have been planted, where wells give an adequate, and sometimes abundant, water-supply. One is a post of the Israel army. The other, named "Well of Light" (Bir Ora), is a training-centre for boys and girls of the secondary schools, who spend a few weeks of pre-military service working the soil. They have turned what was a waste place into a smiling oasis. Water has been found by boring in a Wadi 100 kilometres north of Elath: and that gives hope of a growing agricultural hinterland.

The present harbour-master is an Aryan German ex-sea-captain who was persecuted by the Nazis, escaped to Poland before the World War, and got to Palestine. The site is lovely and romantic: a belt of palms along the shore, bare black and red mountains around, and turquoise waters of the Gulf between them. Three years ago Elath was waste and sand. Now it has barracks, air-field, a fishery-school, a power station, a radio-telegraph installation, a botanical garden, in which the desert plants are gathered, a town hall, and a stadium for entertainment where the world's musicians come to play.

A few miles south of Israel's Elath, on the western side of the Gulf, opposite the Hedjaz, you come to the Egyptian frontier guard-post. An Israel sentry watches above him on the cliff. A modern road runs from the Egyptian post, across the Egyptian section of Sinai, to Ismailia and the Suez Canal, linking Asia and Africa. The last stretch of an older road, rebuilt 100 years ago by the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha, who for a time occupied Palestine, is in Israel's territory. For centuries the Negev has been a desert to be crossed as rapidly as possible. Today it is being transformed into an area of settlement and industry as it was 1,700 years ago.

The CHAIRMAN: Professor Bentwich has very kindly said he will answer questions and I should like to start by asking if he could tell us what size ships could be got into the port of Elath.

Professor BENTWICH: Oh, that I am ignorant and I should hate to say anything about it to an admiral. I was told that the water there is deep close to the shore on the west side. At the moment the ships coming in are only a few thousand tons.

Colonel ROUTH: I wonder how it is that with all our present knowledge we have not got anywhere near the population in that part of the world that they had in ancient days. I take it the ancients had not to remove the sand. They cut down the trees and got going, and I suppose the problem is now more difficult.

Professor BENTWICH: The transformation which has taken place in these last five years is most encouraging. The Negev is altogether a different place. There are perhaps fifty villages and agricultural settlements and this fairly big town at Beersheba.



Colonel ROUTH: When Hore Belisha spoke in the Lords about a canal in the place of the Suez Canal had he any idea of the Negev?

Professor BENTWICH: I cannot speak for him but I expect he had. There have been several schemes: one going back to the nineteenth century was for a canal from Gaza to the Gulf of Akaba. As I understand it, the engineers can make a canal through mountains or over a complete desert. It is just a question of giving them the means.

General MARSHALL CORNWALL: In Northern Negev a considerable amount of what used to be quite fertile country was covered by sand. That could be removed by bulldozers and the real sub-soil could become top-soil. Has anything been done in that way?

Professor BENTWICH: They did bring bulldozers and remove the sand. When they have carried away the sand from the rock and have brought water, they can proceed to cultivation.

Lord BIRDWOOD: Does future development envisage the food being grown in the Negev to maintain what looks like being an industrial population, or would the food have to come from outside?

Professor BENTWICH: I think the idea is that the settlers shall grow the main foods. In the year 1952-53, which was a very good rainfall, half the cereal product of Israel came from the Negev. Barley and maize grow well, and the hope is that they will be able to produce what is required for an industrial population.

Mr. WHITE: Are there Administrative headquarters in Beersheba, anything as in the days of the Mandate? Is there a District Officer?

Professor BENTWICH: The administration is run very similarly to the Mandate Régime, and there is a District Officer. There was for a time a military governor, but Beersheba is now a municipality with an elected council. There is also, as in the Mandate time, a tribunal for the Bedu Arabs.

Group Captain SMALLWOOD: Has there been any sort of oil exploration in the Negev?

Professor BENTWICH: There has been much prospecting in these last years. Before the first World War the Standard Oil Company were prospecting in the northern part of the Negev. One company started drilling last year. So far, apparently, they have not struck oil.

Mr. H. F. AYRES: May I ask if any experiment has been made to show that the land is really good agricultural land? The reason I am asking that is because some years ago in the Sudan we were told if we put water on some land we should get crops. This was carried out on rather a large scale and the first year the crops were very good. The second year they were indifferent, and the third year nothing happened at all. I was wondering if this land was of permanent agricultural value or if it might deteriorate rapidly.

Professor BENTWICH: I cannot answer from knowledge, but I should be surprised if they did not have scientific testing of the land.

