

Where Should One Look for Gideon's Ophra? ⁽¹⁾

The location of the biblical city of Ophra (עפרה) is still unknown, with only very few hints as to its whereabouts found in the Bible⁽²⁾. In addition to what exists in the Book of Judges, information in Josh 18,23 and 1 Sam 13,17 may prove to be of some use. In the Book of Joshua (18,23) a city of the same name was listed along with other cities of Benjamin; situated some 7 kilometres north-west of Tell Beitin, this city has often been identified with modern et-Taiyibeh, and may well be the place referred to in 1 Sam 13,17, which points to the movement of Philistine military troops from Michmash to Beth-horon⁽³⁾.

Older literature on the subject identifies a place in the lot of Benjamin (presumably modern et-Taiyibeh) with that referred to in Judges 6⁽⁴⁾. However, the current scholarly consensus is that we are in fact dealing with two distinct places.

1. *Status quaestionis*

It has often been acknowledged that Ophra — a city of considerable importance in the story of Gideon — was situated in the Jezreel valley, between Megiddo and Mount Tabor. This theory springs from the belief that the city must have been located inside the territory of Manasseh; a presupposition derived exclusively from the biblical passages linking Gideon with the tribe (Judg 6,15). Any subsequent quest to locate Gideon's city should therefore be a straightforward one, especially given that — thanks to the ostraca from Samaria — the

⁽¹⁾ The earlier form of this article was presented at The Society of Biblical Literature – International Meeting, Cambridge (UK), July 20-25, 2003. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Ernest Axel Knauf for his kind remarks on the text. I would also like to thank Victor Johnson and Klaudyna Hildebrandt for refining the original English version of this paper.

⁽²⁾ J. SIMONS, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament* (Leiden 1959) 291, § 561.

⁽³⁾ F.M. ABEL, *Géographie de la Palestine* (Paris 1933-1938) II, 17; S.R. DRIVER, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford 1960) 102.

⁽⁴⁾ ABEL, *Géographie*, II, 17, 60, 92.

territory of Abiezer is clearly identifiable⁽⁵⁾. In the biblical account, Gideon was described as a descendent of Abiezer (Judg 6,11.24.34; 8,32). It thus seems quite simple to determine which tell, in such a well-defined area, ought to be identified with the city referred to in the Book of Judges.

This basic conformity led many scholars to look for a site that corresponded to the account in Judges within the area of the tribe of Manasseh, thus prompting the hypothesis that identifies Gideon's Ophra with modern 'Affuleh in the Jezreel valley⁽⁶⁾. This identification is based on two arguments; one exegetical, which maintains that if Gideon had in fact been living in the North (within the tribe of Manasseh, and moreover within the territory of Abiezer), then one could expect the city only to exist in such an area⁽⁷⁾; the other toponymical, stating that the modern name ought to reflect, in some way, the original name (commonly assumed to be that preserved in MT), in which case the modern name must be derived from the root 'pr. The hypothesis identifying Ophra with 'Affuleh' fits both arguments quite comfortably. The toponymical evaluation would require the prerequisite assumption that the final vowel "r" had been replaced by the vowel "l". Scholars advancing this hypothesis have attempted to give it further force by recalling the site-name 'p-r, listed in the Thut-mose' III inscription⁽⁸⁾. The Egyptian text does not point to any precise area, but does suggest that it was a big, if not important, place, and if, in fact, this city were Gideon's Ophra, it would surely have had to be a centre both big and important.

Nadav Na'aman has proffered another identification⁽⁹⁾. Very much in line with the earlier scholarly consensus, Na'aman based his hypothesis on the idea that Ophra existed within the territory of Abiezer and, having established that Abiezer lay to the south of

⁽⁵⁾ A. LEMAIRE, *Inscriptions Hébraïques* (Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient 9) (Paris 1977) I, 60-61, 65.

⁽⁶⁾ Y. AHARONI, *The Land of the Bible. A Historical Geography* (London 1967) 240-242; Z. KALLAI, *Historical Geography of the Bible* (Jerusalem – Leiden 1986) 422-423; J.M. HAMILTON, "Ophra", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (= *ABD*) (ed. D.N. FREEDMAN; Doubleday 1992) V, 27-28.

⁽⁷⁾ KALLAI, *Historical Geography*, 422; a similar argument was presented half a century earlier, by J. GARSTANG, *Joshua Judges* (London 1931) 319, who stated that it is: "Silet el Dhahr, six miles nearer Shechem, a situation which seems to satisfy the context".

⁽⁸⁾ KALLAI, *Historical Geography*, 422-423.

⁽⁹⁾ N. NA'AMAN, "Pirathon and Ophrah", *BN* 50 (1989) 11-16.

Shechem, advanced that it was possible to identify Ophra with modern Far'ata⁽¹⁰⁾. This site had been previously — and according to Na'aman incorrectly — identified with the biblical city of Pirathon. Na'aman also advanced a philological argument, stating that the original toponym of the site was indeed Ophratha (*prth*) — it had merely been metathesized at some earlier point. This would explain the modern form of the site name: *pr^hth*.

One can identify a similar method of argumentation in both the above hypotheses, namely that, from the biblical text, one is able to approximately gauge where the site must have been located, and from this point locate the place whose name could be traced back to the form attested in MT.

Such theories demonstrate a few common characteristics; firstly, the acceptance of the biblical topography and geographical details, where the location of Ophra within Manasseh and Abiezer is taken for granted; secondly, the main criterion used to examine the theory is its conformity to the biblical account. Here, one must look for the site in the area suggested by the book of Judges, and the site must fit the description transmitted by the Scriptures. This means that the site identified with biblical Ophra would have had to be a big city at a point in time that corresponds to the so-called period of Judges.

Another common feature of a great many hypotheses suggesting the location of the biblical city is the assumption of toponymical persistence. This leads scholars to assume that, in spite of linguistic changes in Palestine, toponyms known from written sources and from different times (and in fact still used today) can be traced back to the form attested in MT. There is also another important assumption in such a methodology, namely the conviction of the toponymical originality in MT. Even if we consider modifying the place name, it is always the form attested in MT which is seen as the closest to the original toponym.

The hypothesis advanced by Ernest Axel Knauf represents a very different point of departure, and suggests that the modern place name, known from biblical material, need not necessarily be connected etymologically with the biblical form. Knauf accepts the possibility that the modern toponym was altered over a long period of time, and therefore no linguistic connection between the current form and that presented in MT can be found. Accordingly, Knauf considers the

⁽¹⁰⁾ Ibid., 15.

option of the biblical Ophra being identified with Jinsâfût⁽¹¹⁾. As a starting point to his hypothesis, he chooses the contemporary names of those cities located within the territory of Abiezer listed in Samaria Ostraca. According to Knauf's theory, from the four toponyms (Fer'ata, Immatin, Burin and Jinsâfût), it is only the latter which lacks a satisfactory etymology in Arabic⁽¹²⁾. Philology was a key element of Knauf's interpretation, as he had been intending to discover the etymology of the modern toponym, i.e., Jinsâfût. The reconstruction assumes the original form of "Canaanite **gan(n) šâpôt*, 'garden of judgment', or **gan(n) (ha-)šôpet*, 'garden of the judge'.." ⁽¹³⁾. For Knauf, the presence of a *šôpet / šâpôt* element in the toponym located within the territory of Abiezer is sufficient enough to justify its identification with Ophra. A quite similar methodology was used by Herbert Donner, who advanced the identification of Ophra with Tell Sofar⁽¹⁴⁾.

Knauf was aware of the importance of archaeological information. However, in its absence, the only remaining criterion was the philological one. He advocates the archaic origins of the site and its name on the basis of a reconstructed toponym, connected to the Canaanite group of languages. If the name had been created for example in Hebrew, it clearly would have predated the domination of Aramaic or Arabic. To summarise, Knauf argues that it would have been quite implausible for the Abiezer clan to have generated a single judge (Gideon or Jerubbaal) from Ophra, together with another from somewhere else. According to Knauf, the original name of modern Jinsâfût suggests that it was connected with the judge or his prerogatives, in which case it is hardly possible for it not to be identical to the biblical Ophra.

The present article aims to propose an alternative location of the biblical Ophra, and is based, moreover, on a very different set of methodological assumptions, the first of which is, most notably, a

⁽¹¹⁾ E.A. KNAUF, "Eglon and Ophrah: Two Toponymic Notes on the Book of Judges", *JSOT* 51 (1991) 25-44, esp. 34-39.

⁽¹²⁾ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁽¹³⁾ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁽¹⁴⁾ H. DONNER, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel und seiner Nachbarn in Grundzügen* (GAT 4) (Göttingen 1984) I, 171; see *id.*, "Ophra in Manasse. Der Heimatort des Richters Gideon und des Königs Abimelech", *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte*. Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag (eds. E. BLUM et al.) (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1990) 193-206, with a list of previous hypotheses.

rejection of the old axiom that Ophra had to be placed within Abiezer, in the territory of Manasseh.

2. *Ophra and Gideon's connections with Abiezer and Manasseh.*

Albert de Pury elaborated the text on Gideon's building of God's altar (Judges 6) in order to determine the various strata of the story. If de Pury's reconstructed text was indeed the original, it is clear that there were no topographical hints. Furthermore, it lacks any information as to the tribal origins of Gideon⁽¹⁵⁾.

As a matter of fact, the only explicit suggestion tying Gideon to the tribe of Manasseh is to be found in Judges 6,15, notwithstanding mention of Gideon's genealogy derived from Joash, son of Abiezer.

Robert Boling considers those sentences linking Gideon to Abiezer (v. 11: "[terebinth] which belonged to Joash of Abiezer"⁽¹⁶⁾; v. 24: "This altar still stands in Ophrah of Abiezer") to be secondary glosses⁽¹⁷⁾.

In the main text of the etiological story of the altar in Ophra, there is only one verse which explicitly points to Gideon's belonging to the tribe of Manasseh: "My clan, you must know, is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least important in my family" (6,15). In the entire story only two other verses suggest such a genealogy (Judg 6,35 and 7,23). The very presence of the *topos* concerning "the weakest in the tribe and the father's house" ought to make us treat with caution any evaluation of the historical value of this text.

Other biblical passages are of no help in determining whether Gideon, Joash and Abiezer are tied to Manasseh. The only real suggestion is the above-mentioned verse in Judges 6,15. Surprisingly enough, the axiom linking Ophra to Manasseh has a very weak biblical basis. Indeed, those biblical passages offering such a location come

⁽¹⁵⁾ A. DE PURY, "Le raid de Gedeon (Juges 6,25-32) et l'histoire de l'exclusivisme yahwiste", *Lectio Difficilior Probabilior? L'exegèse comme expérience de décloisonnement. Mélanges offerts à Françoise Smyth-Florentin* (ed. T. RÖMER) (Heidelberg 1991) 181-182.

⁽¹⁶⁾ J.A. EMERTON, "Gideon and Jerubbaal", *JTS* 27 (1976) 310, paid attention to verse 11, in which, incidentally, it is not Ophra which is being bound to Abiezer, but rather Joash. Cf. W. BLUEDORN, *Yahweh Versus Baalism. A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative (JSOTSS 329)* (Sheffield 2001) 72-73.

⁽¹⁷⁾ R.G. BOLING, *Judges. Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (AB 6A; Garden City, NY 1975) 134.

from the very latest text stratum, and that being the case, there is no objection to looking for another location for Ophra.

First and foremost, one has to closely examine the biblical material, and when attempting to pinpoint the location of Ophra, the key text is without doubt the account concerning Gideon (Judg 6–8). Suffice to say, this is not the appropriate place to discuss all the textual problems arising from an analysis of the story of the building of God's altar in Ophra, nor the relationship between Gideon and Jerubbaal; these problems have been discussed widely enough for us to want to venture into further inquiry. Notwithstanding, the basic problem lies in precisely locating the place thought by biblical authors to have been Gideon's Ophra.

The Hebrew term "Ophra" (עפרה) occurs six times in MT⁽¹⁸⁾, and was rendered in LXX as Εφραθα and on one occasion as Γοφερα (1Sam 13,17). The Greek word Εφραθα was used in LXX not only as the equivalent of Ophra (עפרה), but also of the term "Ephratah" (אפרתה) (Gen 35,16.19; 48,7; Ruth 4,11; Ps (131)132,6; 1 Chr 2,24.50; Mic 5,1). The Greek text of Josh 15,59 in LXX is longer than its Hebrew equivalent in MT, and the name of Εφραθα does not have any Hebrew counterpart. Josh 18,23 in LXX contains the double tradition of rendering this *nomen loci* as Εφραθα and Αφρα. A different tradition can be found in the prophetic text in Obadiah 1,20, where the Greek word Εφραθα was rendered in MT with the *hapax legomenon*: ספרד⁽¹⁹⁾, in the *Vulgate*, translated as "Bosfor"⁽²⁰⁾.

This author's hypothesis is that the *nomen loci* "Ophra" (עפרה), as the name of the city where Gideon built God's altar, is an artificial literary creation. There is no such place as Ophra, and never has been, and the city in which the story of Gideon was situated is not to be found in the territory of Manasseh. Had the details of the account been historical, the place of action would have been a big city, with an extensive tower or fortress (במער) enclosed either within, or very near to, city walls. None of the sites found in the area of Manasseh correspond to such a description. The cities in the North, which may well have been thought of as being Ophra, lack the remains of any construction of a military or defensive character. If one is going to look for Gideon's Ophra, he or she should leave the territory of Manasseh and move southwards.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Josh 18,23; Judg 6,11; 8,27.32; 1 Sam 13,17; 1 Chr 4,14.

⁽¹⁹⁾ BDB, 709.

⁽²⁰⁾ Cf. BOLING, *Judges*, 160.

I propose that Gideon's Ophra is in fact Ephratah, which in some instances is identified as Bethlehem⁽²¹⁾.

3. *The place-name: Ophra*

In the Hebrew version of the Bible the difference between the two names is limited to the first radical letter (ayin in "Ophra" – עפרה and aleph in "Ephrata" – אפרתה), although this difference does not present an obstacle to the identification of the two. The verbs *'pr* and *'pr* are closer to each other than one may think. The name אפרתה possibly derives from the noun אפר, meaning "dust" or "ash(es)"⁽²²⁾. The verb *'pr* is not attested in the Bible. The name עפרה is usually derived from the root *'pr* II, while the verb *'pr* I is a verbum denominativum (attested only in 2 Sam 16,13) - meaning "dusting with dust" – created from the noun עפר – meaning "dry earth", "dust", "debris of ruined city", "earth of the grave"⁽²³⁾. These two verbs seem to be very close in meaning⁽²⁴⁾. Even though we know that in Mishnaic Hebrew the first radical ayin and aleph were able to replace one another, we are not able to determine whether the root *'pr* and *'pr* were exchangeable.

Let us consider the hypothesis that the toponyms are in close proximity not through any linguistic rule of their exchangeability, but rather as a result of the actions of Bible redactors. They were conscious of the closeness of meaning and phonetic value of the two, and replaced one with the other.

The same Greek word, being a transliteration of both forms, can be seen as another supporting argument. Both עפרה and אפרתה are rendered in LXX by the word Εφραθα, which may point to the identification of the toponyms. The linguistic aspect therefore sustains our hypothesis of a close interrelationship of the two place-names: "Ophra" and "Ephrata".

⁽²¹⁾ Such an idea had been presented by G. VON RAD, *Genesis. A Commentary* (London 1956).

⁽²²⁾ Cf. Num 19,9,10; 2 Sam 13,19; Job 13,12; Ps 102,10; Isa 44,20.

⁽²³⁾ BDB, 779-780; L. KOEHLER – W. BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1994) II, 861-862; Cf. A. MURTONEN, *Hebrew in Its West Semitic Setting. A Comparative Survey of Non-Masoretic Hebrew Dialects and Traditions* (Leiden – New York – København – Köln 1989) I/Bb, 99.

⁽²⁴⁾ U. CASSUTO, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem 1989) I, 75, pointed to the equivalence of the nouns *'pr* and *'pr* in Genesis 3,19 and Ezek 28,18 respectively.

Even if a philological analysis of the two toponyms allows us to identify them, and thus locate Ophra in a certain site in Palestine, further examination is still needed. The first task would be to establish the real denomination of the place Ephrata, with which we propose to identify the name Ophra. The next would be the identification of the name with a certain site.

One of the most instructive biblical passages helping to determine the location of the site is Mic 1,10: "Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all; in Beth-leaphrah (בֵּית לַעֲפְרָה) roll yourselves in the dust". Many commentators deem it hardly possible to know what place was intended here, and do not attempt to identify Beth-leaphrah, mentioned in Mic 1,10. However, as the entire passage described the sites in Judah, we can expect its location to be within this southern tribe⁽²⁵⁾.

Maybe the only exception is Wolfram von Soden, who pointed out a possible connection between Beth-leaphrah and the place name Ephrathah (אֶפְרַתָּה)⁽²⁶⁾. I believe this suggestion ought to be picked up on, especially as we do have another hint sustaining the connection of the name with Judah. In 1 Chr 4,14 the word "Ophra" (עֲפְרָה) is used to refer to the name of a person — a Judahite⁽²⁷⁾.

If one agrees that in both cases (1 Chr 4,14 and Mic 1,10) Ophra (עֲפְרָה; בֵּית לַעֲפְרָה) is connected to the territory of Judah then the location of the Gideon city within Manasseh is far from being the only possible solution.

Based on Gen 35,19; 48,7; 1 Sam 17,12 and Mic 5,2, the name "Ephrata" is commonly seen as a synonym of the city name Bethlehem (as in the analogous case where "Hebron" and "Kiriath-Arba" describe the same place). However, another usage of the name "Ephrata" presupposes a different identification, namely that Bethlehem and Ephrata are not identical. Ruth 1,2; 4,11 and 1 Chr 2,50-51; 4,4 indicate that the two place names denote different sites⁽²⁸⁾.

⁽²⁵⁾ D.R. HILLERS, "Micah, Book of", *ABD* IV, 807-810. Cf. C.S. SHAW, *The Speeches of Micah. A Rhetorical-Historical Analysis* (JSOTSS 145) (Sheffield 1993); F.I. ANDERSEN – D.N. FREEDMAN, *Micah* (AB 24E; New York 2000) 208-209; L.M. LUKER, "Beth-Le-Aphrah (place)", *ABD* I, 689.

⁽²⁶⁾ W. VON SODEN, "Zu einigen Ortsbenennungen bei Amos und Mich", *ZAH* 3 (1990) 214-220, esp. 217.

⁽²⁷⁾ According to the genealogy in 1 Chr 4,1-14, עֲפְרָה was the grandson of Othniel, son of Kenaz, descendent of Kaleb, mentioned also in Judg 3,7-11.

⁽²⁸⁾ A further complication appears when Gen 48,7 is analysed; there, the expression כְּבִרְת־אֶרֶץ לְבַא אֶפְרַתָּה; $\chi\alpha\beta\rho\alpha\theta\alpha$ τῆς γῆς τοῦ ἐλθεῖν Εφραθα; is used. For its meaning see: G. GARBINI, *Note di lessicografia ebraica* (Brescia 1998) 34-39;

On analysing these passages carefully, one may conclude that the identification of the two names is secondary. There are three explanations for such an assumption. Firstly, the name Ephrata may be a denomination not of the city, but of the region in which Bethlehem was situated. Such a view is supported by Ruth 1,2, within the expression “Ephrathites from Bethlehem”. A further argument for this interpretation is found in Ps 132,6, where the expression “in Ephrathah” is put in straight parallelism with the expression “in the fields of Jaar” (cf. Jub 32,33-34; Mat 2,6).

Another explanation of the discrepancy in identifying the two toponyms can be provided if we accept the hypothesis that the toponym Ephrata (or any other, being its Vorlage, for example: בית עפרתה) originally denoted a place other than Bethlehem, and was only secondarily identified with it.

The third explanation comes by the way of a diachronic hypothesis. It is possible that two different names were not in use simultaneously, but described the same place during a certain time span. An analogous situation happened with Jerusalem, which for quite a long time, along with its traditional name, was called Aelia Capitolina.

Whatever the case, there is no doubt that the material analysed hitherto points to the area of Bethlehem as the probable location of Ephrata.

Accordingly, we ought to look for a place fitting the description of an important administrative centre where a well-known cult place was situated, and one which would correspond to the description provided in the biblical account. Is there any place in which one could imagine Gideon to have demolished Baal’s altar at the top of the fortress, and where the judge was buried?

There is no need to accept or reject the biblical account of the brave judge as historically reliable. It is enough to claim that some elements in the biblical story had to be so plausible as to be accepted as true. If indeed that were the case, secondary details would be crucial, and there would be no need to look for an altar. One would have to search for the fortress itself, which is far from being the primary element of the account.

If we accept the above argumentation, one ought to look no further

cf. E. TOV, *The Greek and Hebrew Bible. Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (Leiden – Boston – Köln 1999) 509; J.W. WEVERS, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis* (Atlanta 1993) 583-584, 811.

than a place very close to Bethlehem, where an architectural structure identified with a fortress can be found, namely Ramat Rahel, located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

4. *Ramat Rahel as the biblical Ophra?*

The site was inhabited at the turn of the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. Initially, there was only a citadel, though the city gained in importance in later centuries (especially during the divided-monarchy period)⁽²⁹⁾. The large number of *lmlk*-type seals found in Ramat Rahel from that period suggests the importance of the city in the Judahite administrative system⁽³⁰⁾. After being rebuilt for residential purposes, and later used as the royal palace⁽³¹⁾, the old citadel was destroyed at the beginning of the 6th century BCE, which may point to the Babylonian invasion or the early Babylonian period⁽³²⁾. Finds from the Persian period indicate intensive civil inhabitation, evidenced in the many seals and stamps of the *yhd* / *yhwd* type. In Ramat Rahel, there existed from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BCE a structure which Yohanan Aharoni called the Persian fortress⁽³³⁾.

The surprisingly few finds dating from the Hellenistic period may be attributed to the destruction of the site in the early 2nd century BCE (for example during the Antioch III invasion in 199 BCE)⁽³⁴⁾. The well-dated finds from the period come only from the later times, such as coins from the time of Alexander Jannaeus' reign (103-76

⁽²⁹⁾ Y. AHARONI et al., *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*. Seasons 1961 and 1962 (Roma 1964) 119-120; see Y. AHARONI, "Excavation at Ramat Rahel", *BA* 24, 4 (1961) 98-118; ID., "The Citadel of Ramat Rahel", *Archaeology* 18, 1 (1965) 15-25; ID., "Ramat Rahel", *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (ed. E. STERN) (Jerusalem – New York – London 1993) III, 1261-1267; cf. Z. HERZOG, *Archaeology of the City*. Urban planning in Ancient Israel and its Social Implications (Jerusalem 1997) 250, who points to Northern Kingdom influences in architecture, leading to the assumption that "refugees from the north introduced the stonemason's craft into Judah after the fall of Samaria and were employed by the royal court for construction work in the Capital and its surroundings". Future digs on the site, to be conducted by Oded Lipschits, could well reveal further precious finds.

⁽³⁰⁾ AHARONI, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*, 119; N. NA'AMAN, "An Assyrian Residence at Ramat Rahel?", *Tel Aviv* 28 (2001) 260-280.

⁽³¹⁾ AHARONI, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*, 120.

⁽³²⁾ *Ibid.*; the later destruction of the citadel is advocated on the base of King Jehoiakin's seal (in stratum V A).

⁽³³⁾ AHARONI, *The Citadel*, 16.

⁽³⁴⁾ AHARONI, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*, 121.

BCE)⁽³⁵⁾. Aharoni — one of the tell excavators — identified Ramat Rahel with biblical Beth ha-Kerem (Jer 6,1; Neh 3,14)⁽³⁶⁾. This proper name, translated as “house of the vineyard”⁽³⁷⁾, witnesses to the abundance of archaeological finds showing a high degree of wine production in and around this area. Aharoni furthermore states that Jehoiakim’s palace (608-597), constructed close to Jerusalem’s city walls and mentioned in Jer 22,13-19, could be identified with the remains of investments found at Ramat Rahel⁽³⁸⁾.

Further confirmation of the identification of Ophra and Ramat Rahel is found in the city’s original name. According to the reconstruction proposed by Giovanni Garbini, who rejected the identification of Ramat Rahel as Beth ha-Kerem, another city name can be restored⁽³⁹⁾. Based on the Georgian Calendar from 10th century CE, he proposed the original form of the name: *Beto’er / Betebrey / Betebre* as: בית עפרה or בית הפר⁽⁴⁰⁾, with the latter form recalling the name used for Bethlehem in Mic 1,10 — Bet Efratah (בית לעפרה)⁽⁴¹⁾. The forms proposed by Garbini show the equivalence of the names deriving from the roots: *ʿpr* and *ʾpr*.

Archaeological works at Ramat Rahel show the dominant role of the citadel and large residential complex. The enigmatic fortified place from the story recalls Migdal Eder, the tower (מגדל) mentioned in the account of Rachel’s death (Gen 35,21). There is hardly any doubt as to the place of Rachel’s death being the same as her burial place. In Genesis one can find the information in מגדל-עדר — “the tower of flock”⁽⁴²⁾. Unfortunately, we do not know whether it is the proper name of a certain tower, or the description of an anonymous architectural structure. To further complicate matters, we do not know where the structure mentioned in the text was located. In this context one may recall the biblical text where, in the account of Gideon, “a stronghold” (בזעזע) is mentioned. Let us then speculatively propose the

⁽³⁵⁾ Ibid.

⁽³⁶⁾ Ibid., 122; cf. R.W. YOUNKER, “Beth-Haccerem”, *ABD* I, 686-687.

⁽³⁷⁾ Cf. The term כֶּרֶם in Deut 22,9; Is 3,14; Cant 8,11.

⁽³⁸⁾ AHARONI, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*, 122-123.

⁽³⁹⁾ G. GARBINI, “Sul nome antico di Ramat Rahel”, *RSO* 16 (1961) 199-205; ID., *Note di lessicografia*, 36.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ The form of the name reconstructed by Garbini contains *ayin* not *aleph*.

⁽⁴¹⁾ This is a very corrupted verse, and probably the original form of the name is preserved in the Syriac version: בית עפרה.

⁽⁴²⁾ This name appears again in Mic 4,8, this time connected with Jerusalem. Cf. D.C. LIID, “Eder, Tower of”, *ABD* II, 284.

hypothesis that in בית עפרה there was a structure which could have been described as מעון or מגדל-עדר.

In his *Onomastikon*, Eusebius of Caesarea describes the place where Rachel was supposed to have died, and where Jacob made camp (Gen 35,21) - to quote, "Gader. A town where Jacob lived, and Reuben rose against Ballas"⁽⁴³⁾. The author, writing in the 4th century C.E., replaced Migdal-Eder with the name Gader. Moreover, he understood the word Balla in Gen 35,21 (in LXX this usually denotes Rachel's maid Bilhah) as the being against whom Reuben acted. The question remains as to why Eusebius, contrary to MT and LXX, refuses to allude to Reuben's sin with Bilhah, creating instead the story of Reuben acting against a certain Balla. The Greek text is quite clear: Ῥουβὴν τῆ Βαλλὰ ἐπανίσταται. The Greek verb ἐπανάημι / ἐπανίστημι must be understood here as "to rise up against" or "to rise in insurrection"⁽⁴⁴⁾. Is it quite possible that Eusebius here alludes to the hero acting not against Balla (Βαλλὰ) but rather against Baal (Βααλ)? Is it possible that a certain tradition known to Eusebius created the connection between Reuben's acts and the story of Gideon-Jerubbaal? Is it then possible that מגדל-עדר, known from the story of Reuben, where he arose against Baal, is the same as מעון, where Gideon arose against Baal?

On the basis of above-proposed hypothesis it is quite possible to hazard a further evaluation of the name מגדל-עדר. As well as appearing in Gen 35, this proper name is found in Mic 4,8⁽⁴⁵⁾, where it is linked to the acts of the future Messiah. The Messiah, according to the book of Micah, must come from Bethlehem — Ephrata (5,1). One may surmise that the two places, being closely related to the future Messiah (mentioned in Mic 4,8 and 5,1), are identical. If that is indeed the case, Ephrata might well be the other name of Migdal-Eder.

Having gone so far in my hypothetical reconstruction, it is not too much to suggest the logical emendation in MT — changing עדר into עפר. It is important at this juncture to note that reading מגדל-עדר is far from being certain, especially when we consider LXX. The transliteration in "πύργος Γαδερ" (Gen 35,21(16)) i.e., "the fortified

⁽⁴³⁾ *The Onomasticon by Eusebius of Caesarea* (ed. J.E. TAYLOR) (Jerusalem 2003) 39. Cf. *Eusebius: Das Onomastikon der biblischen Ortsnamen* (ed. E. KLOSTERMANN) (Leipzig 1904).

⁽⁴⁴⁾ LSJ⁹, 609; J. LUST et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart 1992) I, 165.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Re complications in interpreting this passage see: ANDERSEN –FREEDMAN, *Micah*, 438-441.

tower” does not support the Masoretic reading⁽⁴⁶⁾. The above-suggested emendation מגדל-עפר* would not be an isolated case, as similar forms are to be found in the Hebrew Bible (cf. מגדל-שכם in Judg 9,46-52, and מגדל-גדר in Josh 15,37). Perhaps then one must look at 1 Chr 2,51: “Salma father of Bethlehem, and Hareph father of Beth-gader”. Although the genealogy of Kalebites points to the separation of two places Bethlehem and Beth-gader, it does support their closeness, which together with the meaningful version used by Eusebius, might suggest the identification of מגדל-גדר / בית-גדר and מגדל-עפר* / בית-עפר*⁽⁴⁷⁾. To summarise, if in fact מגדל-עפר* is referred to in both Micah and Genesis 35, there is hardly any doubt as to why some messianic hopes were connected with a person like Gideon.

That said, one is inclined to say that the identification of Gideon’s Ophra with Ephrata (modern Ramat Rahel), in other words the reconstructed בית-עפר* / מגדל-עפר*, is far more plausible than any connection with Bethlehem.

We may suppose that the Greek version of the Bible contains the original form of the name, which would rather be pronounced “Ephrata” as opposed to “Ophra”. If we agree that the form “Ophra” is an artificial creation used merely to replace the older form “Ephra” (עפר) (or *Migdal-Ephra; *Bet-Ephra), with both being used to denote the place known now as Ramat Rahel⁽⁴⁸⁾, we must then ask the question ‘why?’. The key lies in the royal ideology concentrated around the house of David. This royal house, which had become holy as part of the process of increasing messianic thought, was anchored in “the” certain city — the city of origin of the first king.

5. Rachel’s burial place or Gideon’s capital?

The above hypothesis presents the identification of Gideon’s home city with the place where Rachel is said to have been buried. A clear question remains: which tradition, or which reality, was original — Rachel’s burial place or Gideon’s capital?

⁽⁴⁶⁾ The Hebrew word גדר appears in connection with toponyms Bethlehem and Ephratah in 1 Chr 4,4.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Cf. S.E. MCGARRY, “Beth Gader”, *ABD* I, 686.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Cf. H. CAZELLES, “Bethlehem”, *ABD* I, 712-715. The identification of “Bethlehem” and “Ephrata” can also be found in the work of the Jewish historian from the 3rd century BCE – Demetrius (fr. 2, 10). For editions see F. JACOBY, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin 1923) 722; A.-M. DENIS, *Fragmenta Pseudepigraphorum quae supersunt graeca* (Leiden 1970); C.R. HOLLADAY, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors* (Chico 1983), I, 68-69.

It is enough at this point to state that the place called *Migdal-Ephra or *Bet-Ephra, and transformed in the Bible into "Ephrata", was connected with the two. Such an identification must have been followed, or accompanied, by two other processes in biblical tradition. Firstly, the place where Rachel gave birth to Benjamin, and later died, was moved from the territory of Benjamin southwards to the territory of Judah. Secondly, the artificial identification of Ephrata-Bethlehem was created. In particular, the latter of these literary events had its impact on the messianic tradition, although it is quite possible that Bethlehem appropriated the unusual city prerogatives, which had originally belonged only to Ephrata⁽⁴⁹⁾.

This phenomenon can be best explained by accepting the hypothesis that Gideon's origins lay in Ephrata, and accepting the tradition that David originated from Bethlehem as secondary, with strong borrowings from the first. If this is the case, David's figure would be the personage created out of the tradition of the judge. It is quite possible in this perspective that the tradition of the king, coming from the Philistine dominium, and becoming successor to the Benjaminite king, was built on, and grew with the help of, elements of the tradition of a different person.

This may suggest a presence in the story of Gideon of the old strata connecting the figure of the hero with the monarchy, combat against enemies and religious reform. Characteristically enough, the writer, coming under the strong influence of deuteronomistic ideology, and having described the "good" monarch who came from the royal residence par excellence, had to conclude the story with a sharp critique of the monarchy and the acts of the same hero (Judg 8,26-27).

In accepting the above reconstruction, we are presented with the following set of data. Gideon comes from בית-עפר (i.e., the royal residence or fortress in modern Ramat Rahel); David comes from Bethlehem (בית-לחם). Subsequently, the two places (Bethlehem and Ephrata - אפרתה) become identified with each other. This process (cf. 1 Sam 17,12) had to be associated with the "moving" of Rachel's burial place from the territory of Benjamin to the area of Judah (אפרתה). The biblical text claims openly that Rachel died "some distance from Ephrath" (Gen 35,16), and "on the way to Ephrath" (Gen 35,19). Although this is hardly an appropriate place to discuss the

⁽⁴⁹⁾ This issue is far too complicated to be analysed here. I hope to concentrate on it soon.

entire complicated issue related to the “moving” of Rachel’s burial place and other borrowings of traditions from Benjamin to Judah, it is possible that there existed at a certain time the tradition of Rachel’s tomb being close to the royal residence and fortress in בית-עפר, where Gideon came from, and very close to the city of Bethlehem, where David is said to have come from.

The situation could well be viewed (by the Bible-writers) as complicated, given that Gideon originated from the royal city (and had very strong connections with royal ideology as well; let us recall the *Seper ha-Yamim* where he is called “king”). On the history-mythical level Gideon had become rival to the main figure of the royal (and consequently messianic) ideology originating from Bethlehem — namely David. The changes seen in Judges, as well as the attempt at removing Gideon from the royal city of Ephratah, may be understood as a means of guaranteeing the dominant position of David.

The same reasons may well have influenced the putting in Gideon’s mouth of the important statement following his defeat of the Midianite army, declaring an unwillingness to become king: “Then the Israelites said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian’. Gideon said to them, ‘I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you’” (Judg 8,22-23).

The well-known case of building the heroic myth of king David, whilst diminishing the fame of others, or constructing the myth thanks to the fame of others, can be recalled in this case. The figure of Elkanah (2 Sam 21,19), whose triumph over Goliath was attributed to David, may offer the best example of the practice of building the myth of David through the actions of others. A similar thing could have happened with Gideon, who — like Elkanah — was not deleted from the Bible, but whose fame was attributed to David. There is still a certain difference between Gideon and Elkanah, given that the former was so well known it was impossible to erase his importance and fame from the text. This slight correction was made by creating the city of his origin so as not to present a form of rivalry to David. The mythical plot of Gideon’s acts remained in the Bible, but the Bible-writer tried to hide the similarities between the two royal figures.

One may summarize by stating that it is possible that, by a process of assimilation, the tradition of the brave, righteous and God-fearing judge Gideon was incorporated into the large tradition concentrated around Bethlehem. Maybe here the connection between Gideon and

the enigmatic judge Ibzan from Bethlehem can be found (Judg 12,8-10). Even more striking effects can be seen if we accept Gideon as the Judahite hero.

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The place name Ophra, attested in the narrative about Gideon in Judges, seems to have only a secondary connection with the clan of Abiezer and the tribe of Manasseh. The toponym itself, transmitted in MT, is possibly an artificial, altered form of the original name. As such it could be derived from one of the interrelated roots *ʿrp* or *ʾrp* and preserved in the LXX as Εφραθα. This assumption permits the hypothesis of identifying Ophra, known from the Gideon story with Ephrata, and other place names (e.g., Beth-leaphrah in Mic 1,10). Most of the possibilities suggest a relationship with the territory of Judah.

The identification of Gideon's city, where the important role was reserved for a fortress or tower, with Ephrata in Judah, finds support not only in linguistics but in archaeology as well. A good candidate for the city of such an important hero, a judge of royal charisma, is modern Ramat-Rahel. The structures excavated there, used as a fortress and royal residence, might have been the original location where Gideon's narrative (Judges 6) took place. Whatever the original toponym (*Ephra; *Migdal-Ephra; *Bet-Ephra), it could have been connected with Gideon. The reason why the redactors altered the text, and "moved" Gideon's city northward to the territory of Manasseh was the literary conflict between two important figures of Judahite origins, the king-like Gideon and David, king *par excellence*.

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SUMMARY

The hypothesis presented in this article offers a new way of explaining a number of discrepancies in the biblical text. Perhaps more importantly, it opens the door to the identification of a place known from the biblical tradition with a known site of archaeological importance. Finally, the identification of Ophra with Ramat Rahel, which in ancient times was very likely called בית־עפרה / בית־עפר, sheds light on the tradition of connecting Ephratah (אֶפְרַתָּה) with Judah, (1 Chr 1,19. 50), and the hitherto difficult בית לעפרה in Mic 1,10.