**The “dust of the earth” in the promises to Abram and Jacob (Gen 13:16; 28:14) as an allusion to the town of Ophrah (Josh 18:23)**

**Chris Mckinny**

**Abstract**

Abram and Jacob each visited the Bethel region on two separate occasions (Gen 12:8; 13:3; 28:19; 35:6). On three of these visits, Yahweh reaffirmed his land/descendant promises to them (Gen 13:3; 28:19; 35:6). One feature of God’s promise to all of the patriarchs was that they would be given innumerable offspring. Regarding this, several metaphors were employed to demonstrate the incalculable nature of their descendants. These metaphors include “the dust of the earth” (Gen 13:16; 28:14), “the stars of heaven” (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4), and “the sand on the seashore” (Gen 22:17; 32:12). In this paper, I will demonstrate that the “dust of the earth” metaphor – which is only used in the region of Bethel – likely has a built-in geographical pun associated with it that has not been observed by commentators.

Dr. **Chris Mckinny** – Gesher Media; [chrismckinny@gmail.com](mailto:chrismckinny@gmail.com)

**Introduction**

**Patriarchal similes for innumerable promised offspring**

God’s promise to provide descendants to the elderly and infertile couple of Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah is one of the central themes of the Abrahamic cycle (Gen 12–25:18). Throughout the narrative, Abraham was promised by God on five separate occasions that he would have a son who would have innumerable offspring (Gen 12:5–8; 13:14–18; 15; 17; 22:16–18). Most of these promises include a simile or similes that illustrate the unquantifiability of his descendants. These similes include Abram’s descendants being described like “the dust of the earth” in the promise given near Bethel (Gen 13:16), like the “stars of heaven” at Mamre/Hebron (Gen 15:5) and at Mount Moriah (22:17), as well as like “the sand on the seashore” at Mount Moriah (Gen 22:17).

Isaac’s much shorter narratives (Gen 25:19–27:46)[[1]](#footnote-1) include Yahweh re-affirming his promise to Isaac on two separate occasions in the context of Isaac’s conflicts with Abimelech in the southwestern coastal plain and the Negev (Gen 26:4, 23–25). In the first re-affirmation, God used the single simile – “the stars of heaven” employed earlier with Abraham (Gen 15:5; 22:17) – to indicate to Isaac that the promise was still in effect.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For Jacob (Gen 28–36), the re-affirmation of Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham revolves around Jacob’s two visits to Bethel. On the first visit, Jacob visited the vicinity of Bethel/Luz on his way from Beersheba to Paddan-aram (Gen 28). Here, he was told that his descendants would be like “the dust of the earth” (Gen 28:14). In a later reflection of this visit at Mahanaim, Jacob recounted that God had promised him that his descendants would be “like the sand on the seashore” (Gen 32:12). No simile was used on his return visit to Bethel (Gen 35:1–15) nor during his reflection on the event in Egypt when Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph (Gen 48:3–4, 19).

**Later biblical usage of patriarchal similes**

The “stars of heaven” (six times) and “sands on the seashore” (four times) similes occur frequently in later biblical passages that reflect on the fulfillment of the covenant promise that Israel would have innumerable descendants (see Table 1). Biblical references to the “stars of heaven” as a metaphor for incalculable sums is restricted to allusions back to the promises in Genesis, but the “sands on the seashore” also regularly occurred as simile to refer to large (usually enemy) military hosts.[[3]](#footnote-3) In contrast, the “dust of the earth” simile occurs a single time in later biblical texts only appearing in the Chronicler’s version of Solomon’s initial visit to Gibeon. 2 Chronicles 1:9 reads as follows: “O Yahweh God, let your word to David my father be now fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people *as numerous as the dust of the earth*.” This passage clearly points back to the phrase in Genesis 13:16 and 28:14, but also Israel’s increased population and prosperity in the days of David (e.g., 1 Chr 27:23; 2 Sam 24; cf. 1 Chr 21).

Table 1 - Metaphors illustrating God's promise of innumerable offspring

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Person** | **Location** | **Metaphor for innumerable offspring** | **Passage (description)** |
| Abram | Shechem | **-** | Gen 12:5–7 (entrance into Canaan) |
| Abram | between Bethel and Ai | **-** | Gen 12:8 |
| Abram | between Bethel and Ai | the dust of the earth | Gen 13:16 (separation from Lot) |
| Abram | Mamre/Hebron | the stars of heaven | Gen 15:5 (covenant) |
| Hagar | Beer-lahal-roi | - | Gen 16:10 (promise to Ishmael) |
| Abraham/Sarah | Mamre/Hebron | - | Gen 17 (circumcision) |
| Abraham | Mount Moriah | the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore | Gen 22:17 (sacrifice of Isaac) |
| Isaac | Gerar | the stars of heaven | Gen 26:4 (promise to Isaac) |
| Isaac | Beersheba | - | Gen 26:23–25 (repeated promise after difficulty with Abimelech) |
| Jacob | Bethel/Luz | the dust of the earth | Gen 28:14 (promise to Jacob after difficulty with Esau) |
| Jacob | Mahanaim | the sand on the seashore (recounting Yahweh's promise) | Gen 32:12 (looming potential difficulty with Esau) |
| Jacob | Bethel/Luz | - | Gen 35:1–15 (re-affirmed promise after protection from Canaanites) |
| Jacob | Egypt (remembering Bethel) | - | Gen 48:3–4, 19 (repeating promise to his descendants – giving the double portion to the younger Manasseh) |
| - | various | the stars of heaven | Exod 32:13; Deut 1:10; 10:22; 28:62; 1 Chr 27:23; Neh 9:23; cf. Heb 11:12 (referring back to Patriarchal promise) |
| - | various | the sand on the seashore | 1 Kgs 4:20; Isa 10:22; Jer 33:22; Hos 1:10; cf. 1 Kgs 4:29; Rom 9:27; Heb 11:12 (referring back to Patriarchal promise) |
|  | various | the sand on the seashore (as armed hosts) | Josh 11:14; Judg 7:12; 1 Sam 13:5; 2 Sam 17:11; Rev 20:8 |
| - | various | the dust of the earth | 2 Chr 1:9 (referring back to Patriarchal promise) |

From this discussion it should be clear that the “dust of the earth” simile was not the preferred method of referring back to the Abrahamic covenant in later biblical literature, as it is used only a single time out of 11 references that point back to the promise. This is despite the fact that these similes are used almost equally in Genesis with the “dust of the earth” appearing twice (Gen 13:16; 28:14), the “sand on the seashore” also appearing twice (Gen 22:17; 32:12), and the “stars of heaven” appearing three times (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4). And, in fact, each of these are universal symbols that convey unquantifiable amounts.

**Like “the dust of the earth” (Gen 13:16; 28:14)**

So, why did the later biblical writers prefer “stars (כּוֹכָבִים)” and “sand (חוֹל)” over “dust (עָפָר)”? I believe the answer to this question has to do with the particular geographical setting of Genesis 13 and 28 where Abram and Jacob received a promise from Yahweh. In my view, the “dust of the earth” is actually a geographical pun referring to Ophrah (עָפְרָה).[[4]](#footnote-4) Ophrah is a biblical town near Bethel (Josh 18:23; 1 Sam 13:17; see also 1 Macc 11:34; John 11:54)[[5]](#footnote-5) that is universally identified with et-Tayibe (Robinson and Smith 1856, 1.447).[[6]](#footnote-6) Ophrah is located less than four miles (6 km) to the northeast of Bethel (Beitin)[[7]](#footnote-7) and just south of and below Baal-hazor (Jebel ʿAṣur).[[8]](#footnote-8) Jebel ʿAṣur is the highest location in the central highlands rising to 3,300’ or 1000 m asl, which is around 800’ or 240 m higher than Jerusalem. Before continuing further with this suggestion, let us briefly examine the two passages in which the “dust of the earth” are referenced.

“Yahweh said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, **northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.** **I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.** **Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.**” So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to Yahweh.” (Gen 13:14–18 ESV)

“And he (Jacob) dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, Yahweh stood above it and said, “I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. **The** **land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.** **Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.** Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”” (Gen 28:12–15 ESV)

It is striking that both of these passages deal with the allotment of territory to Abram and his descendants. In Genesis 14, there is a clear division of land between Lot’s chosen eastern allotment (the Jordan Plain – i.e., the Jordan Rift Valley) and Abram’s remaining allotment in Canaan proper. This is indicated by the cardinal points of direction, as well as Yahweh’s command to Abram to “walk through the length and breadth of the land.” Some scholars have noted the similarity of Yahweh’s land allotment to Abram to ancient Near Eastern land grants versus vassal-suzerain treaties (see e.g., Walton 2009). These same geographical details[[9]](#footnote-9) are present in the passage with Jacob (Gen 28). In addition, Jacob’s return visit to Bethel (Gen 35:1–15) was followed by the death of Rachel who died giving birth to Benjamin within the to-be allotted territory of Benjamin (probably at Qubur Bani Israil - see McKinny 2021). In my view, this event clearly prefigures the association of Benjamin with this region (cf. also Jer 31:15). Finally, the standing stone/pillar of Bethel (Gen 28:18–22; 35:14–15) might also point to the later geographical boundary between Ephraim and Benjamin (Josh 16:1–3; 18:12–13) in a similar way to the standing stone setup to mark the covenant/boundary between Laban and Jacob in Gilead (Gen 31:44–54) (e.g., Finkelstein and Römer 2014).

Interpreting the Bethel theophanies as geographically significant is actually attested in Jewish traditions from the second temple period. The *Genesis Apocryphon* of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1Q20) is a 1st century BCE (or earlier) pseudepigraphic midrash on the events of the Book of Genesis with the characters of Lamech, Noah, and Abraham serving as the main narrators (White 1992). Col. 21 of the *Genesis* *Apocryphon* parallels and expands on Genesis 13. This sections indicates that following his separation from Lot (see Gen 13:8–13) Abraham viewed the whole land from “Ramath-Ḥazor,”[[10]](#footnote-10) which was located “north of Bethel” (col. 21; cf. 14–18). Fitzmyer translates this section as follows (emphasis mine):

“He bought a house for himself in Sodom and dwelt in it. I was dwelling in the **hill country of Bethel**. It was distressful to me that Lot, the son of my brother, had separated from me. *vacat* Then God appeared to me in a night-vision and said to me: ‘**Go up to Ramath-Ḥaṣor which is to the north of Bethel**, the place where you dwell, and lift up your eyes and look to the east and to the west and to the south and to the north, and look at all this land which I am giving to you and to your descendants <for> all the ages!’ So the following day I went up to **Ramath-Ḥaṣor, and I viewed the land from this high place**: from the river of Egypt to Lebanon and Senir, and from the great sea (i.e., the Mediterranean) to the Ḥauran, and all the land of Gebal up to Qadesh, and the whole of the great desert which is east of the Ḥauran and Senir as far as the Euphrates. And He said to me: ‘To your descendants I will give all of this land, and they will have possession of it for all ages. **I will multiply your descendants (to be) like the dust of the ground which no person is able to count**—your descendants will likewise be impossible to count. Arise, walk, go and see how long it is and how wide it is, because I will give it to you and to your descendants after you forever (Fitzmyer 2004, 220; cf. also Machiela 2009, 78–79)!’”

Clearly, the writer of the *Apocryphon* focused on the maximal limits (and beyond) of what Abraham could have seen from the top of Baal-hazor. Ironically, the reference to the “dust/ עָפָר” might refer to a location (Ophrah) that was in immediate proximity to Baal-hazor. From a tribal allotment perspective, Ophrah was a town situated on the border between Ephraim and Benjamin that was allotted to Benjamin (Josh 18:23). Scholars remain divided over whether or not the seemingly Ephraimite towns of Zemaraim (cf. 2 Chr 13:4),[[11]](#footnote-11) Bethel, Avvim (probably Ai – cf. 1 Chr 7:28), Ophrah, and others actually fell within the northern boundary of Benjamin (Josh 18:12–20) or if the Benjaminite town lists (Josh 18:21–28) reflect a later period of the monarchy (McKinny 2017, 303–31). If it is the former, then Baal-hazor and Ophrah itself would mark the northernmost boundary point of Benjamin’s territory before it turns southward to Bethel (Tavger 2015). We should also note Tavger’s intriguing suggestion to connect E.P. 914 – the second highest hill in the region – with the cult-site of Bethel and perhaps also the location of Abram’s altar (Tavger 2021). Brief excavations at E.P. 914 have revealed Middle Bronze and Iron II remains (Tavger 2018, 141–46).

Ophrah also figures in two other biblical accounts – the Philistine invasion against Saul at Michmash and Geba (1 Sam 13:17) and the conflict between Abijah and Jeroboam on Mount Zeramaim (2 Chr 13:4, 19–20).[[12]](#footnote-12) In the latter passage, Abijah successfully defeated Jeroboam and took Bethel (Beitin), Jeshanah (Burj el-Isaneh), and Ephron (עֶפְרוֹן) – which is normally understood to be an alternative form of Ophrah (et-Tayibe). This passage adds an additional layer to the border conflicts between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah during the Iron II (cf. also 1 Kgs 15:17, 22) (for a discussion of this passage see McKinny 2017, 303–31).

The geographical and textual background of Ophrah as a border settlement near Bethel (i.e., a town that demarcated allotments between tribal Benjamin and Ephraim and/or national Israel and Judah) seems to fit the suggestion offered here that Ophrah is implied in Genesis 13:16 and 28:14, which likewise refer to the allotment of the region to Abram and Jacob. Given this context, the dust-simile in the promises made to Abram and Jacob seems to be implying that their descendants would be blown as dust over the entire landscape of Canaan – a fitting image given the macro-vistas offered by Baal-hazor and/or E.P. 914 that was perhaps inspired by the nearby town of Ophrah.

While Ophrah does not appear elsewhere in Genesis, (overlooked) geographical puns or word-plays[[13]](#footnote-13) may be present in biblical texts particularly when the geographical context is considered. The multi-disciplinary approach of historical geography blends physical geography, philology, archaeology, biblical (and related) literary analysis, and historical evidences (Rainey and Notley 2014, 9–25) to make site identifications, as well as notice geographical details that may have been missed without utilizing the array of tools within historical geography.[[14]](#footnote-14) We should also note this is not the only example of עָפָר being associated with a geographic pun or a wordplay in the Hebrew Bible (see e.g., Rendsburg 2019, 122–127, 392–410).

**Dust/** **עָפָרas a flexible modifier for biblical toponyms**

There are several biblical toponyms based on the root עָפָר,[[15]](#footnote-15) while other place names sound similar that allowed for them to be used in puns or wordplays in biblical literature. The most obvious example comes from Micah’s pun-filled lament in Micah 1:10–16, which mourns the destruction of a number of Judahite towns in the Shephelah in connection with Sennacherib’s campaign in 701 BCE. The lament begins with a reference to the former Philistine city of Gath (2 Kgs 12:17), now become a Judahite town (Levin 2018): “Tell it not in Gath; weep not at all.” This is followed by the enigmatic town “in Beth-le-aphrah roll yourselves in the dust (ל־תִּבְכּוּ בְּבֵית לְעַפְרָה עָפָר הִתְפַּלָּשְׁתִּי).” This town has been identified with various locations including et-Taiybe on the western edge of the Judahite hill country (Saarisalo 1931, 98), Tel ʿErani of the western Shephelah (Suriano 2010), as an alternate name for Beth-shemesh (Levin 2018, 449),[[16]](#footnote-16) or perhaps Keratiya (preserved at Beit ʿAffeh?). Regardless of its exact identification, it is clear that the toponym Beth-le-aphrah is used in a negative wordplay connected with the practice of covering one’s self with earth or dust in mourning (cf. Josh 7:6; Job 30:19).

Micah probably also employs עָפָר as a description of the relative insignificance of Migdal-eder in Micah 4:8 (וְאַתָּה מִגְדַּל־עֵדֶר עֹפֶל בַּת־צִיּוֹן) as indicated by the LXX (καὶ σύ πύργος ποιμνίου αὐχμώδης θύγατερ Σιων). On the basis of the LXX, the MT’s עֹפֶל can probably be emended to עָפָר, which should be translated adjectively to “dusty Migdal-eder.” This is important because it would mean that the “dusty Migdal-eder” to which “the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem” (Micah 4:8) prefigures the much more well-known passage in Micah 5:2. This latter verse reads as follows: “Bethlehem, Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (for a fuller treatment of this suggestion and its contribution to the discussion of the location of Rachel’s Tomb see McKinny 2021). In my view, Migdal-eder in this section (cf. Gen 35:21) should be understood as a nearby settlement to Bethlehem (not Jerusalem) and the section of Micah 4:8–5:6 should be taken together as referring to the future birth of the Davidic messiah at Bethlehem.

Epher (עָפָר) was one of the sons of Keturah (“incense”) – the concubine of Abraham (Gen 25:4; 1 Chr 1:33). Along with the similar sounding Ephah (עֵיפָה), Epher may be understood as reflecting the “dusty” nature of the living conditions of Midianite tribes in northern Arabia (see below). However, it also seems quite possible that the name could reflect the physical qualities of incense powder, which was obviously the forte of the Midianites and their southern neighbors of Sheba (e.g., Isa 60:6). Epher and Ephah are usually identified in close proximity to one another in the Midianite heartland – the coastal plain to the south and west of al-Badʿa (traditional home of Jethro).[[17]](#footnote-17)

On at least one occasion, the south Arabian (and/or eastern African) gold source of “Ophir” (אוֹפִיר) is mentioned alongside the similar sounding עָפָר (Job 22:24; cf. also Job 28:1–6; Zeph 9:3 [silver]).[[18]](#footnote-18) It is noteworthy that Ophir is paired together with Havilah/חֲוִילָה in the Table of Nations (Gen 10:29; 1 Chr 1:23). Havilah (probably the northern Arabian town of Ḥaʿil) is likely based on the Hebrew word for “sand” (חול). Thus, in this passage these two “sons” of the south Arabian Joktan son of Eber (Gen 10:25–26)[[19]](#footnote-19) can be characterized as “sandy” and (sounds like) “dusty.” Interestingly, as we have seen above, “sand” and “dust” are both used in the similes to describe the promised innumerable descendants in Genesis.

These examples point to the fact that עָפָר was used in a variety of ways to describe a toponym. The Micah examples indicate the negative aspects of mourning in connection with Beth-le-aphrah (Mic 1:10) and relative poverty in connection with Migdal-eder/Bethlehem (Mic 4:8; 5:2) (see e.g., Baruchi-Unna 2008; 2015; Suriano 2010). The meaning of the Midianite tribe of Epher (Gen 25:4; 1 Chr 1:33) perhaps can be understood as a physical description of incense powder, and the tribes of Ophir and Havilah (Gen 10:29; 1 Chr 1:23) taken together might describe the desert conditions of the sons of Joktan in Arabia.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we briefly looked at the three similes used in Genesis to describe the innumerable offspring that Yahweh promised to Abram/Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In all three instances – the dust of the earth, the stars of the heaven, and the sand on the seashore – can be understood as general symbols for unquantifiable amounts. Clearly, the main point of this aspect of the promise in its various reiterations is that the patriarchs will have countless descendants. However, unlike “the stars of the heaven” and “the sand on the seashore,” I have argued that “the dust of the earth” may have a particular geographic and textual background due to the location of the narrative in the vicinity of Bethel. I have suggested that עָפָר in the simile “your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth” (Gen 13:16 [Abram]; 28:14 [Jacob]) alludes to the nearby settlement of Ophrah (et-Tayibe). This is particularly striking in Genesis 13, as Baal-hazor/Jebel ʿAṣur (directly above Ophrah) may be understood as the setting for Abram’s view of the land as interpreted in the *Genesis Apocryphon*. Ophrah was later a tribal (Ephraim/Benjamin) and national (Israel/Judah) border settlement (Josh 18:12, 28; 2 Chr 13:4, 22; cf. 1 Kgs 15:22), which is also perhaps reflected in Jacob’s erecting standing stones at Bethel (Gen 28:18; 31:45, 51; 35:14). Therefore, it is logical that Ophrah would be alluded to in the simile, and perhaps was the inspiration for this particular metaphor.

I also demonstrated other examples of עָפָר being used as a flexible word for highlighting different aspects of places (e.g., Beth-le-aphrah) and peoples (e.g., Epher) in the Hebrew Bible. These comparative examples provide the conceptional backdrop for connecting the town of Ophrah with the phrase “like the dust of the earth” in Genesis 13:16 and 28:14. While we still cannot count Abram’s descendants, perhaps we might have been able to locate where some of his promised “dust” settled – at Ophrah.

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1. See for example Rendsburg (2013), who argues that unlike the Abraham and Jacob “cycles” – Isaac does not have a fully formed literary “cycle”, and, in fact, the texts associated with Isaac really actually belong to the Jacob cycle. Genesis 26 is the only chapter that fully belongs to the character of Isaac. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The fact that the promise to Isaac occurs after a 20-year period of infertility (Gen 25:21 – cf. Gen 25:20, 26) and the birth of Esau/Jacob (Gen 25:22–26) decreases the narrative stakes associated with the re-affirmed promise. Unlike Abraham, Isaac’s difficulties were not primarily with having legitimate heirs – but with renewed squabbles with Abimelech (Gen 26) and familial discord between his two sons (Gen 25:29–34; 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g., the Hittite armies numbered as sand on seashore at the Battle of Qadesh (COS 2.5A lines 56–74). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To the best of my knowledge, this suggestion has not been offered previously (Delitzsch 1888, 392; Skinner 1910, 253; Speiser 1964, 96–97, 219; Zechariah Kallai 1971; von Rad 1973, 170–73; Westermann 1985, 170–72; Wenham 1986, 295; Sarna 1989, 100, 198; Sailhamer 1990, para. 6651; Hamilton 1990, 395–96; Alter 1996, 57, 149; Mathews 1996, 139; Arnold 2008, 280–81; see also Niesiolowski-Spano and Laskowski 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also the suggestion to connect Khirbet el-Maqatir with “Ephraim” in John 11:54 (Stripling 2015). In my view, it seems likely that “Ephraim” of this passage (and see also Ephraim in 2 Samuel 13:23 McCarter, Jr. 1984, 329–30) should be connected with Ophrah/Aphairema (Hellenistic-Byzantine town and district name) and that there never was a distinct settlement in the region known as “Ephraim.” Ophrah (עָפְרָה) begins with an *ayin* whereas Ephraim begins with an *alef* (אֶפְרָיִם), which are distinct in Hebrew, but often transliterated identically in Greek with either an *epsilon* or *alpha*. Still, the important Early Roman Jewish finds at Khirbet el-Maqatir illustrate that this was a settlement within the region of Aphairema that Jesus and his disciples visited after the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:54). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aharoni refers to the typical change of Ophrah to Tayibe as a “rule concerning euphemism.” The reason for the shift is due to the similar sounding name of “Ophrah” to the Arabic word for demon (ʿifrît). Et-Tayibe means “the favor” (Aharoni 1979, 121). For a detailed analysis for the historical linguistic reasons for the change see Elitzur (2004, 268–90). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This distance closely aligns with Eusebius’ statement that Aphra/Aiphraim was “near Bethel about five milestones to the east” (Onom. 28.4 - Eusebius Caesariensis and Saint Jerome 2003, 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There remains some debate regarding the location of Baal-hazor (see discussion in Levin 2017, 212–13). In my view, the traditional connection with Baal-hazor at Jebel ʿAṣur (see e.g., Thompson 1992, 1.552) remains the best option in light of the suitable Arabic name, the connection with Ramath-hazor in the *Genesis Apocryphon* (see below), and the likelihood that the original text of 2 Samuel 13:23 read “in Baal-hazor, which is beside Ophrah” due to the occurrence of *gophraim* (indicating the guttural *ayin*, e.g., Gaza) in LXXL(McCarter, Jr. 1984, 329–30). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A similar division of the land between Abram and Lot also occurs between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 36:6–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Baal/Ramath Hazor is likely the same as the Hazor in the tradition of the seven Amorite kings who fought against Jacob in the second temple pseudepigraphal *Book of Jubilees* (34:1–10) (VanderKam 2018, 921–28). Interchanging Ramath for Baal probably reflects the distaste of later authors to use “Baal” in toponyms, see discussion in Levin (2017, 212–13). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the identification of Zemariam and Mount Zemarain with er-Rammun see McKinny (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It should be noted that Ophrah near Bethel is distinct from Ophrah of the Abiezrites (Judg 8:32). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the role of word-play and puns in the Hebrew Bible see, (Garsiel 1991; Saxegaard 2010, 25–31; Papademetriou 2015; Rendsburg 2019, 392–410) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Another example of an overlooked possible geographical pun may be found in 1 Kings 19:4–5. This passage reads as follows, “But he (Elijah) himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness (i.e., from Beersheba) and sat under a broom tree (רֹתֶם). And asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough, O Yahweh, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” And he lay down and slept under a broom tree (רֹתֶם). And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” This event has striking parallels with the wilderness wanderings itinerary (Num 33:18–19), which has the Israelites coming to “Rithmah” (רִתְמָה) after leaving Hazeroth (ʿAin Ḥuḍra). The parallel narrative section (Num 12:16; 13:26) indicates that Rithmah should be equated with the region of Kadesh-barnea (Tell el-Qudeirat) with its name likely preserved in Wadi Abu Retemat to the west (Robinson and Smith 1841, I.279, 299). Thus, it seems possible to understand that the writer of 1 Kings 19 is using geographical pun that would alert readers that Elijah was given divinely-provided food and drink at the location where his “fathers” received it (cf. Num 20:1–24; 27:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mount Ephron/ הַר־עֶפְרוֹןwas a boundary point between Judah and Benjamin that is perhaps located at Castel near modern Mevasseret-Zion (Josh 15:9; 18:15) (McKinny 2017, 64). Ophrah of the Abiezrites (Judg 6:11, 24; 8:27, 32; 9:5) was the hometown of Gideon – it was probably located at Khirbet Ṣur near Khirbet ʿAwfar in the hills southwest of Shechem (Raviv and Szanton 2012; McKinny and Tavger 2017, 17\*). Note also the related toponym Hapharaim (Josh 19:19 and references in Egyptian conquest lists). Hapharaim is from a different root ,חפר but it too may be preserved by the Tayibe-phenomen at Taiyiba (east of the Hill of Moreh), although it seems more likely that it should be located at ʿAfula (see e.g., Zecharia Kallai 1986, 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also Na’aman (1995) and von Soden (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Knauf offers Wadi ʿAfal/ʿAfar near el-Badʿa, the nearby Wadi ʿIfriyah, and Tayyib al-Ism (note the possible Tayibe/Ophrah interchange) due west of el-Badʿa on the eastern coastline of the Gulf of ʿAqaba (Knauf 1992, 2.534). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Interestingly, Amzallag suggests that עָפָר should be understood as “ore” in its raw form in this context and others (see discussion in Amzallag 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Several scholars suggest a connection with the south Arabian tribe of Qaḥṭān, which was used to describe all the inhabitants of South Arabia (Simons 1959, 48; Hess 1992, 935; Retsö 2003, 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)