

Ophrah (Place)

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1. A Town in Benjamin

Ophrah (MT *ʿOprâ* = “place of dust/gazelle/summit”; LXX Εφραθά; Vg. *Ofra*) is a town in the tribal inheritance of Benjamin near Zemaraim, Bethel, Awim, and Parah (Josh 18:23). According to 1 Sam 13:17, Ophrah is located in the land of Shual, which may be identified with Shaalim (1 Sam 9:4). This site is one of the destinations to which the Philistine army was sent from Michmas after Jonathan’s surprise raid. Obviously, the ancient road led from Michmas to Ophrah, and therefore, Ophrah must be located on an important road to the north. Because of the etymological connection, Ophrah might be equated with Ephron (MT *ʿEprôn*), and in fact Ephron seems to be a later form of the toponym Ophrah used in postexilic times. The main part of Mt. Ephraim with the centers of Beth-El, Ephron/Ophrah, and Jeshanah was conquered by the Judean king Abijah (2 Chr 13:19).

Eusebius is familiar with a village called Apharaema, five miles east of Bethel (*Onom.* 28.4–5). Moreover, he describes the Ophrah way leading to the land of Shual (*Onom.* 142.2). Jerome translates Afara correctly with “her soil” (*Nom. hebr.* 24.20–21). Biblical Ophrah might be identical with Ephron/Ephraea on the Madaba Map northeast of Bethel.

Furthermore, Ephraea is located north of Jerusalem at the twenty-first milestone (*Onom.* 86.1–2). Sometimes Ophrah is identified with Aphairema, a district given to Judea by Demetrius (1 Macc 11:34). The Arabic geographer Yāqūt mentions a fortress ʿAfrā near Jerusalem.

The toponym Ophrah can be associated with ʿI-*frīt* (demon), and this negative connotation would be removed by the name *ṭayyib el-ism* (the name is good). Following this reasoning, the site of Ophrah might be found at places called eṭ-Ṭayyibe. The Benjaminitic Ophrah is usually located at eṭ-Ṭayyibe (1784.1511), a site with archaeological remains dating from the Iron Age to the Byzantine period. This identification also matches the description of Eusebius since it is located about 6.5 km north of Bethel. The old name ʿAfrā is still used in modern times.

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2. A Town in Manasseh

Ophrah is the name of a town in the tribal inheritance of Manasseh and the home of the clan of Abiezer (Judg 6:24). Ophrah is a significant setting in the narratives of Gideon. An angel appeared to Gideon under the terebinth near Ophrah to appoint him to be Israel’s savior (Judg 6:11). Gideon subsequently built an altar for YHWH in this place (Judg 6:26–28). After his military exploits, Gideon made an ephod out of the Midianite booty and placed it in his hometown Ophrah (Judg 8:27), which became, according to the narrative, a source of apostasy for Israel. Gideon was buried in Ophrah in the tomb of his father (Judg 8:32). The Gideon narrative is located in the Jezreel Valley, since Gideon is affected by the Midianites who invaded the Jezreel valley (Judg 6:11, 33) and operated at the Harod spring and the hill of Moreh (Judg 7:1). Perhaps the clan of Abiezer settled in the Jezreel valley and moved to the Manasseh hills at some time or Gideon was secondarily related to the clan of Abiezer.

A northern site Ophrah in the Jezreel valley might be mentioned in the list of Thutmose III (No. 53–54: *ʿpr šry* and *ʿpr wr*). Josephus mentions a place Ephra where Gideon was buried (Josephus, *Ant.* 5.232). Eusebius knows only of a place called Ephrata in the Manassite inheritance, from whence Gideon came, but gives no further information (*Onom.* 80.2–3). However, Eusebius mentions a village named Aphraia six miles north of Megiddo (*Onom.* 28.25), which might be Ophrah and not Hapharaim (Josh 19:19).

This northern Ophrah might be identified with el-ʿAffūle (1774.2240) since the interchange of the liquid consonant *r* to *l* is possible. The archaeological evidence points to activity during the Bronze and Iron Ages, which would suit an identification with biblical Ophrah and the *ʿpr* of Thutmose III. This site might then be located in the border region of Manasseh and could be the early settlement of the tribe of Abieser. The earlier identification of biblical Ophrah with eṭ-Ṭayyibe (1921.2233), about 10 km northwest of Bethshean, is improbable, since its archaeological record starts only in the Hellenistic period. Because of its location in the Manassite hills and its archaeological remains, only Ḥirbet eṭ-Ṭayyibe (1672.2136) might also be connected with Manassite Ophrah.

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3. A Town Belonging to the Clan Abiezer

Ophrah is the name of a town belonging to the Manassite clan Abiezer near Shechem, where Abimelech, son of Gideon, slaughtered his seventy brothers – except for Jotham – in the house of his father (Judg 9:5). Since the proclamation of Abimelech’s kingship followed immediately after the slaughter, Ophrah should be found near Shechem. Samaritan sources know about a place called Ophrah/Ophratha near Shechem. Moreover, the Abiezrites most probably settled in the hill country of Manasseh. According to the Abiezrite toponyms, Tawīl and ʿElmātān, mentioned on the Samaria Ostraca (No. 13 and 28), Abiezer seems to be a district west of Shechem, named after the clan. Therefore, Abiezrite Ophrah should be located in that region, though it is also possible that the clan of the Abiezrites had no permanent abode and therefore Ophrah might be found outside that area.

The Abiezrite Ophrah might be located on Tell Šōfar (1733.1818), with archaeological remains dating from the Late Bronze Age to the Byzantine period. Although Khirbet el-ʿŌfar (1714.1781) lacks archaeological support, it could have preserved the biblical name. A linguistic combination of Ophrah with Jinšāfūt (1625.1762) = Heb. *gan haššōpēt* (garden of the judge [e.g., Gideon]) is highly speculative and cannot be strengthened by archaeological evidence. Sometimes Ophrah is equated with Ferʿata (1659.1775). The modern toponym Ferʿata is linguistically related to the Samaritan name Ophratha

and developed by metathesis. However, Ferʿata is usually identified with biblical Pirathon.

Although both are rendered by Εφραθα in the LXX, it is highly questionable whether the biblical Ophrah is related to Judean Ephrata. Judean Ophrah/Ephrata may be different from Bethlehem and could be found in the Chronicler’s genealogy of Judah (1 Chr 4:14) and in the place Beth-leaphrah in Mic 1:10. Judean Ophrah is sometimes equated with Rāmat Rāḥēl (1706.1275). However, this identification is based on a speculative interpretation of biblical texts.

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