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The “Dust of the Earth” in the Promises to Abram and Jacob as an Allusion to the Town of Ophrah

Chris McKinny

Abstract

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

Keywords: Ophrah, dust of the earth, Abram, Jacob, historical geography
Patriarchal Similes for the Promise of Innumerable 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 (Genesis 12 – 25, 18). During the course of the narrative, Abraham was promised by God on five separate occasions that he would have a son who would have innumerable offspring (ibid. 12, 5–8; 13, 14–18; 15, 5; 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” (עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ), in the promise given near Bethel (ibid. 13, 16), like “the stars of heaven” (כְּכוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם), at Mamre/Hebron (ibid. 15, 5) and at Mount Moriah (ibid. 22, 17), as well as like “the sand on the seashore” (כַּחוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שְׂפַת הַיָּם) at Mount Moriah (ibid.).

Isaac’s much shorter narratives (ibid. 25, 19 – 27, 46) include Yahweh reaffirming his promise to Isaac on two separate occasions in the context of his conflicts with Abimelech in the southwestern coastal plain and the Negev (ibid. 26, 4, 23–25). In the first reaffirmation, God used the single simile – “the stars of heaven” (כְּכוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם), employed earlier with Abraham (ibid. 15, 5; 22, 17) – to indicate to Isaac that the promise was still in effect.

For Jacob (ibid. 28–36), the reaffirmation 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. Here, he was told that his descendants would be like “the dust of the earth” (עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ; ibid. 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 of the sea” (כַּחוֹל הַיָּם; ibid. 32, 13). No simile was used on his return visit to

1 See, for example, Gary Rendsburg (1986, 71–77), 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 actually belong to the Jacob cycle. Genesis 26 is the only chapter that fully belongs to the character of Isaac.

2 The fact that the promise to Isaac occurs after a 20-year period of infertility (Genesis 25, 21; cf. ibid., 20, 26) and the birth of Esau/Jacob (ibid., 22–26) reduces the narrative importance associated with the reaffirmed promise. Unlike Abraham, Isaac’s difficulties were not primarily with having legitimate heirs, but with renewed quarrels with Abimelech (ibid. 26) and familial discord between his two sons (ibid. 25, 29–34; 27).
Bethel (ibid. 35, 1–15), nor during his reflection on Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph in Egypt (ibid. 48, 3–4, 19).

**Later Biblical Usage of Patriarchal Similes**

The “stars of heaven” (six times) and “sand on the seashore” (four times) similes occur frequently in later biblical passages that reflect on the fulfillment of the covenant 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 “sand on the seashore” simile also regularly occurred to refer to large (usually enemy) military hosts. In contrast, the “dust of the earth” simile occurs a single time in later biblical texts, appearing only 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 to the phrase in Genesis 13, 16 and 28, 14, but also alludes to Israel’s increased population and prosperity in the days of David (e.g. 1 Chronicles 27, 23; 2 Samuel 24; cf. 1 Chronicles 21).

This discussion should make it 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 the 11 references that point back to the promise. This is despite the fact that these similes are used with almost equal frequency in Genesis, with the “dust of the earth” appearing twice (Genesis 13, 16; 28, 14), the “sand on the seashore” also appearing twice (ibid. 22, 17; 32, 12), and the “stars of heaven” appearing three times (ibid. 15, 5; 22, 17; 26, 4). And, in fact, each of these are universal symbols that convey unquantifiable amounts.

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3 See e.g. the Hittite armies numbered as sand on seashore at the Battle of Qadesh (*The Battle of Qadesh*, 34, lines 56–74).
Table 1: Metaphors Illustrating God’s Promise of Innumerable Offspring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Metaphor for innumerable offspring</th>
<th>Passage (description)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abram</td>
<td>Shechem</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Genesis 12, 5–7 (entrance into Canaan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram</td>
<td>between Bethel and Ai</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>ibid., 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram</td>
<td>between Bethel and Ai</td>
<td>the dust of the earth</td>
<td>ibid. 13, 16 (separation from Lot)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abram</td>
<td>Mamre/Hebron</td>
<td>the stars of heaven</td>
<td>ibid. 15, 5 (covenant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hagar</td>
<td>Beer-lahai-roi</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>ibid. 16, 10 (promise to Ishmael)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham/Sarah</td>
<td>Mamre/Hebron</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>ibid. 17 (circumcision)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>Mount Moriah</td>
<td>the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore</td>
<td>ibid. 22, 17 (sacrifice of Isaac)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Gerar</td>
<td>the stars of heaven</td>
<td>ibid. 26, 4 (promise to Isaac)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Beersheba</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>ibid., 23–25 (repeated promise after difficulty with Abimelech)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Bethel/Luz</td>
<td>the dust of the earth</td>
<td>ibid. 28, 14 (promise to Jacob after difficulty with Esau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Mahanaim</td>
<td>the sand of the sea</td>
<td>ibid. 32, 13(12) (looming potential difficulty with Esau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Bethel/Luz</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>ibid. 35, 1–15 (reaffirmed promise after protection from Canaanites)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Egypt (remembering Bethel)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>ibid. 48, 3–4, 19 (repeating promise to his descendants – giving the double portion to the younger Manasseh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>the stars of heaven</td>
<td>Exodus 32, 13; Deuteronomy 1, 10; 10, 22; 28, 62; 1 Chronicles 27, 23; Nehemiah 9, 23; cf. Hebrews 11, 12 (referring back to Patriarchal promise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>the sand of the sea</td>
<td>1 Kings 4, 20; Isaiah 10, 22; Jeremiah 33, 22; Hosea 1, 10; cf. 1 Kings 4, 29; Romans 9, 27; Hebrews 11, 12 (referring back to Patriarchal promise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>the sand on the seashore</td>
<td>Joshua 11, 4; Judges 7, 12; 1 Samuel 13, 5; 2 Samuel 17, 11; Revelation 20, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>the dust of the earth</td>
<td>2 Chronicles 1, 9 (referring back to Patriarchal promise)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like “the Dust of the Earth” (Genesis 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 in 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).\(^4\) Ophrah is a biblical town near Bethel (Joshua 18, 23; 1 Samuel 13, 17; see also 1 Maccabees 11, 34; John 11, 54)\(^5\) that is universally identified with et-Tayibe (Robinson and Smith 1856, 447),\(^6\) located less than four miles (6 km) to the northeast of Bethel (Beitin)\(^7\) and just south of and below Baal-hazor (Jebel ‘Aṣur).\(^8\) Jebel ‘Aṣur is the highest location in the central highlands rising to 3,300 feet, or 1,000 meters, which is around 800 feet or 240 meters higher than Jerusalem (see fig. 1 below). 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

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\(^5\) 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 1984, 329–330) 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 an 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).

\(^6\) Yohanan Aharoni refers to the typical change of Ophrah to Tayibe as a “rule concerning euphemism” (Aharoni 1979, 121). The reason for the shift is due to the similar sounding name of “Ophrah” to the Arabic word for demon (ʿifrīt). Et-Tayibe means “the favor”. For a detailed analysis for the historical linguistic reasons for the change, see Elitzur 2004, 268–290.

\(^7\) This distance closely aligns with Eusebius’ statement that Apha/Alphraim was “near Bethel about five milestones to the east” (Onomasticon 28, 4).

\(^8\) There remains some debate regarding the location of Baal-hazor (see discussion in Levin 2017, 212–213). In my view, the traditional connection with Baal-hazor at Jebel ‘Aṣur (see e.g. Thompson 1992) remains the most probable 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 LXX\(^1\) (McCarter 1984, 329–330).
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 (Genesis 13, 14–18).

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” (ibid. 28, 12–15).

It is striking that both of these passages deal with the allotment of territory to Abram and his descendants. In Genesis 13, there is a clear division of land between Lot’s chosen eastern allotment (the “Jordan Plain”, Genesis 13, 10 – 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” (ibid., 17). Some scholars have noted the similarity of Yahweh’s land allotment to Abram to ancient Near Eastern land grants to those in vassal-suzerain treaties (see e.g. Walton 2009). These same geographical details about the land allotment⁹ are present in the passage with Jacob (Genesis 28). In addition, Jacob’s return visit to Bethel (ibid. 35, 1–15) was followed by the death of Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin within the to-be

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⁹ A similar division of the land between Abram and Lot also occurs between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 36, 6–8.
allotted territory of Benjamin. In my view, this event clearly prefigures the association of Benjamin with this region (cf. also Jeremiah 31, 15). Finally, the standing stone/pillar of Bethel (Genesis 28, 18–22; 35, 14–15) might also allude to the later geographical boundary between Ephraim and Benjamin (Joshua 16, 1–3; 18, 12–13) as similar to the standing stone arrangement marking the covenant boundary between Laban and Jacob in Gilead (Genesis 31, 44–54; e.g. Finkelstein and Römer 2014).

Interpreting the Bethel theophanies as geographically significant is actually attested to in Jewish traditions from the Second Temple period. The *Genesis Apocryphon* of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1Q20) is a first 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). Column 21 of the *Genesis Apocryphon* parallels and expands on Genesis 13. This section indicates that following his separation from Lot (see Genesis 13, 8–13), Abraham viewed the whole land from “Ramath-Ḥazor”, which was located “north of Bethel”. John Fitzmyer translated this section as follows:

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 [...] 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

10 The two main candidates for Rachel’s Tomb (Genesis 35, 20; 1 Samuel 10, 2) are Qubur Bani Israil (near Ramah/er-Ram) and Kubbet Rahil north of Bethlehem. For a discussion of the numerous issues involved with identifying the location of the tomb, which is most likely at Qubur Bani Israil, see McKinny 2021.

11 Baal/Ramath Hazor is likely the same Hazor as that in the tradition of the seven Amorite kings who fought against Jacob in the Second Temple pseudepigraphal Book of Jubilees (Jubilees 34, 1–10). Interchanging Ramath for Baal probably reflects the distaste of later authors to use “Baal” in toponyms; see discussion in Levin (2017, 212–213).
land of Gebal up to Qadesh, and the whole of the great desert which is east of the Hauran 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!” (Genesis Apocryphon, 220; emphasis mine [C.M.]).

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; עָפְרָה) that was in immediate proximity to Baal-hazor (fig. 1). From a tribal allotment perspective, Ophrah was a town situated on the border between Ephraim and Benjamin that was allotted to Benjamin (Joshua 18, 23). Scholars remain divided over whether the seemingly Ephraimite towns of Zemaraim (cf. 2 Chronicles 13, 4), Bethel, Avvim (probably Ai; cf. 1 Chronicles 7, 28), Ophrah and others actually fell within the northern boundary of Benjamin (Joshua 18, 12–20) or if the Benjaminite town lists (ibid., 21–28) reflect a later period of the monarchy (McKinny 2017, 303–331). If the former is the case, then Baal-hazor and Ophrah itself would mark the northernmost boundary point of Benjamin’s territory before it turns southward to Bethel (Tavger 2015, 177–181). We should also note Aharon Tavger’s intriguing suggestion to connect E.P. 914 – the second highest hill in the region – with the cult site of Bethel, and perhaps the location of Abram’s altar (Tavger 2021). Brief excavations at E.P. 914 have revealed Middle Bronze and Iron II remains (Tavger 2018, 141–146).

Ophrah also figures in two other biblical accounts – the Philistine invasion against Saul at Michmash and Geba (1 Samuel 13, 17) and the conflict between Abijah and Jeroboam on Mount Zeramaim (2 Chronicles 13, 4, 19–20). In the latter passage, Abijah successfully defeated Jeroboam and took Bethel (Beitin), Jeshanah (Burj el-Lisaneh).

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12 For the identification of Zemaraim and Mount Zemarain with er-Rammun, see McKinny 2015.
13 It should be noted that Ophrah near Bethel is distinct from Ophrah of the Abiezrites (Judges 8, 32).
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 Kings 15, 17, 22; for a discussion of this passage see McKinny 2017, 303–331).

The geographical and textual background of Ophrah as a border settlement near Bethel (i.e. a town that demarcated tribal allotments between Benjamin and Ephraim and/or national allotments between Israel and Judah) seems consistent with 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 expansive vistas offered by Baal-hazor and/or E.P. 914, that were perhaps inspired by the nearby town of Ophrah.

**Fig. 1:** Location of Ophrah and nearby sites that are mentioned in the paper
While Ophrah does not appear elsewhere in Genesis, overlooked geographical puns or wordplays may be present in biblical texts, particularly when the geographical context is considered (for the role of wordplay and puns in the Hebrew Bible, see Garsiel 1991; Saxegaard 2010, 25–31; Papademetriou 2015; Rendsburg 2019, 392–410). The multidisciplinary approach of historical geography blends physical geography, philology, archaeology, biblical (and related) literary analysis, and historical evidence (Rainey and Notley 2014, 9–25) to make site identifications, as well as to identify geographical details that may have been missed without utilizing the array of tools within historical geography. We should also note this is not the only example of עפר being associated with a geographic pun or a wordplay in the Hebrew Bible (see e.g. Rendsburg 2019, 122–127, 392–410).

Dust (עפר) as a Flexible Modifier for Biblical Toponyms

There are several biblical toponyms based on the root עפר, while other place names sound similar enough that they could be used in puns or wordplays in biblical literature. The most

14 Another example of an overlooked possible geographical pun may be found in 1 Kings 19, 4–5: But he [Elijah] himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness [i.e. from Beersheba] and sat under a broom tree [רוטם]. 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 [רוטם]. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat”. This event has striking parallels with the wilderness wanderings itinerary (Numbers 33, 18–19), which has the Israelites coming to “Rithmah” (רתם) after leaving Hazeroth (‘AIN Hudra). The parallel narrative section (ibid. 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, 279, 299). Thus, it seems possible to understand that the writer of 1 Kings 19 is using a geographical pun that would alert readers that Elijah was given divinely-provided food and drink at the location where his “fathers” received it (cf. Numbers 20, 1–24; 27, 14).

15 Mount Ephron (היר עפרון) was a boundary point between Judah and Benjamin that is perhaps located at the Castel near modern Mevaseret Zion (Joshua 15, 9; 18, 15; McKinny 2017, 64). Ophrah of the Abiezrites ( Judges 6, 11, 24; 8, 27, 32; 9, 5) was the hometown of Gideon and was probably located at Khirbet ʿSur near Khirbet ʿAwfar in the hills southwest of Shechem (Raviv and Szanton 2012; McKinny and Tavger 2017, 17*). Note also the related toponym Hapharaim (Joshua 19, 19). 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. Kallai 1986, 203).
obvious example can be found in 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 Kings 12, 17), now 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” (אַל 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 ‘Erani of the western Shephelah (Suriano 2010), as an alternate name for Beth-Shemesh (Levin 2018, 449; see also von Soden 1990; Na’amán 1995), or perhaps Keratiya (preserved at Beit ‘Affeh). 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. Joshua 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, 1. 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”. In my view, Migdal-eder in this section (cf. Genesis 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 with it as referring to the future birth of the Davidic messiah at Bethlehem.

Epher (עָפָר) was one of the sons of Keturah (קְטוּרָה, “incense”), the concubine of Abraham (ibid. 25, 4; 1 Chronicles 1, 33). Along with the similar sounding Ephah (עֵיפָה), Epher may be understood as reflecting the “dusty” nature of the living conditions of

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16 For a fuller treatment of this suggestion and its contribution to the discussion of the location of Rachel’s Tomb, see McKinny 2021.
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. Isaiah 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-Bad’a (the traditional home of Jethro).  

On at least one occasion, the south Arabian (and/or eastern African) gold source of “Ophir” (אָפִיר) is mentioned alongside the similar sounding עפר (Job 22, 24; cf. also ibid. 28, 1–6; Zephaniah 9, 3 [silver]). It is noteworthy that Ophir is paired together with Havilah (חֲוִילָה) in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10, 29; 1 Chronicles 1, 23). Havilah (probably the Northern Arabian town of Ha’il) 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 (Genesis 10, 25–26) 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 עפר 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 (Micah 1, 10) and its relative poverty in connection with Migdal-eder/Bethlehem (ibid. 4, 8; 5, 2; see e.g. Baruchi-Unna 2008; 2015; Suriano 2010). The meaning of the Midianite tribe of Epher (Genesis 25, 4; 1 Chronicles 1, 33) perhaps can be understood as a physical description of incense powder, and the tribes of Ophir and Havilah (Genesis 10, 29; 1 Chronicles 1, 23) taken together might describe the desert conditions of the sons of Joktan in Arabia.

17 Ernst Knauf offers Wadi ‘Afal/Afar near el-Bad’a, the nearby Wadi ’Ifriyah, and Tayyib al-Ism (note the possible Tayibe/Ophrah interchange) due west of el-Bad’a on the eastern coastline of the Gulf of ‘Aqaba (Knauf 1992).
18 Interestingly, Nissim Amzallag (2017) suggested that עפר should be understood as “ore” in its raw form in this context and others.
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; Retsō 2003, 30).
Summary

In this paper, we briefly examined the three similes used in Genesis to describe the innumerable offspring that Yahweh promised to Abram/Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 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, I have argued that, unlike “the stars of the heaven” and “the sand on the seashore”, “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” (Genesis 13, 16 – Abram; 28, 14 – Jacob) alludes to the nearby settlement of Ophrah (et-Tayibe). This viewpoint is particularly striking in Genesis 13, as Baal-hazor (Jebel ‘Aṣur; 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, which is also perhaps reflected in Jacob’s erecting standing stones at Bethel. 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. While we still cannot count Abram’s descendants, perhaps we can locate where some of his promised “dust” settled – at Ophrah.
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בריס מקיני

אבחרה ויעקב ביקרו ביוון בית אל, אל עתית מתה ביטח והmericanית שונתה (בראשית יב, ז; כח, י; לה, ט). בשולשית מנובייה התנהל ארבעה פגישות ומכתביה שהbero כל ע론 של עיניו וסמכות להמחשה עניין זה המקראי משתמש
בכמה דימויים, ובהם "כַּעֲפַר הָאָרֶץ" (שם יג, טז; כח, יד), "כְּכַוָּכֹבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם" (שם כב, יז; כו, ד; וראו גם טו, ה) ו"כַחוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּם" (שם כב, יז; וראו גם לב, יג). במאמר זה מובאת ההצעה שטרם הובחנה בידי פרשנים וחוקרי מקרא, ולפיה הביטוי "כעפר הארץ" – שמוזכר רק
בהקשר לאזור בית אל – מכיל כינוי גיאוגרפי לעיר עפרה.

עפרה, עפר הארץ, אברהם, יעקב, גיאוגרפי-היסטורי

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