

Pirathon and Ophrah

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I

Pirathon appears only twice in the Old Testament: (a) as the burial place of the Judge Abdon son of Hillel (Judg 12:13-15) and (b) as the village of Benaiah, one of David's officers¹ (2Sam 23:30; 1Chr 11:31; 27:14). From the early days of modern research it was identified with the village of Far^Cata, situated 10 km. south of Samaria (Sebaste)². The only reason for this location is the close similarity of names. However, upon closer examination of the data, one may question whether it is justified to suggest such a northern location for the biblical town³.

First, according to Judg 12:15 Pirathon was located "in the land (b'rš) of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites (*bhr h'mlqy*)". "The land of Ephraim" is identical to Ephraim's inheritance whose northern border ran along the line of Wadi Qanah - Tappuah (Sheikh Abu Zarad) - Sahl el-Makhneh - Wadi Tirzah (Wadi el-Far^Cah)⁴. The village of Far^Cata is located 10 km. north-

1 For the translation of *šālišim* as "officers", see N. NA'AMAN, "The List of David's Officers (*šālišim*)", VT 38 (1988) 71-79.

2 See for example: Pharchi (Parchi), Caftor wa-pherach (ed H. EDELMANN), Beroline 1852, 479; E. ROBINSON, Later Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions, III, Boston 1850, 134; F.M.ABEL, Topographie des campagnes Machabéennes, RB 34 (1925) 206, 210-11; id., Géographie de la Palestine, II, Paris 1938, 409; A. ALT, Das Institut in den Jahren 1929 und 1930, PJB 28 (1931) 29-31; J. SIMONS, The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament, Leiden 1959, 601; Y. AHARONI, The Land of the Bible London 1967, 382. For the analysis of the name Pirathon, see W. BOREE, Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas (2nd ed.) Hildesheim 1968, 60, no. 57, 109.

3 The identification was questioned by W.F. ALBRIGHT, Bronze Age Mounds of Northern Palestine and the Hauran: the Spring Trip of the School in Jerusalem, BASOR 19 (1925) 7; id., Archaeological and Topographical Explorations in Palestine and Syria, BASOR 49 (1933) 26; Z. KALLAI, Pirathon, Encyclopaedia Biblica, VI, Jerusalem 1971, 621-23 (Hebrew); Z. SAFRAI, Borders and Government in Eretz Israel in the Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods, Tel Aviv 1980, 60-62 (Hebrew).

4 N. NA'AMAN, The Boundary between Ephraim and Manasseh and Mount Ephraim,

west of this line. In order to uphold the identification one is forced to assume that the land (*'rṣ*) of Ephraim is another designation for Mount (*hr*) Ephraim whose northern boundary apparently reached the Wadi Tizrāh - Tul Karem line⁵. It goes without saying that this assumption is not supported by the text.

Second, the site of Far^Cata is located further north than all other towns in the list of David's officers (2Sam 23:8-39; 1Chr 11:11-41a)⁶. The closest town, Nahale Gaash, that is mentioned immediately after Pirathon (2Sam 23:30; 1Chr 11:32) and identified south of Khirbet Tibneh (biblical Timmath-heres; see Josh 24:30; Judg 2:9)⁷, is situated 20 km. south of Far^Cata. It is thus clear that Pirathon should be sought for in the inheritance of Ephraim, possibly (though not necessarily) not far from Khirbet Tibneh.

Pharathon is mentioned among the seven places that have been fortified by Bacchides in 160 B.C. (1Mac 9:50; Jos. Ant 13, 15)⁸. These fortified places defended the main roads leading to Jerusalem from the east (Jericho), west (Emmaus, Beth-horon) and north (Bethel). Thamnata is usually identified with Khirbet Tibneh (map reference 160 157) and Teph(n) is sometimes identified with biblical Tappuah (Sheikh Abu Zarad), though this is by no means certain⁹. Locating Pharathon in the northern site of Far^Cata is out of the question. Thus, by identifying biblical Pirathon with Far^Cata, one is forced to disassociate it from the Pharathon that was fortified by Bacchides.

The fortified town of Pharathon may well be sought for in the area of

in: *Borders and Districts in Biblical Historiography*, Jerusalem 1986, 145-58, with earlier literature in p. 145, n. 1; Z. KALLAI, *Historical Geography of the Bible. The Tribal Territories of Israel*, Jerusalem-Leiden 1986, 148-59 and Map no. 4.

5 NA'AMAN, *ibid.*, 158-66.

6 See the maps published in: B. MAZAR, *The Military Elite of King David*, in: *Canaan and Israel. Historical Essays*, Jerusalem 1974, 203 (Hebrew); Y. AHARONI, *Carta Atlas of the Bible*, Jerusalem 1964, 63, no. 94 (Hebrew); P.K. McCARTER, *II Samuel (AncB 9)*, Garden City, N.Y. 1984, Map 9.

7 K. ELLIGER, *Die dreißig Helden Davids*, PJB 31 (1935) 47-48. For the toponym *g^oš* in an Egyptian topographical list, see M. GÖRG, *Namenstudien VIII: Südpalästinische Ortsnamen*, BN 12 (1980) 18.

8 C. MÖLLER und G. SCHMITT, *Siedlungen Palästinas nach Flavius Josephus*, Wiesbaden 1976, 34-37, with earlier literature; Z. KALLAI, *The Northern Boundary of Judah*, Jerusalem 1960, 95-99 (Hebrew); SAFRAI (above, n. 3), 60-62 (Hebrew).

9 MÖLLER und SCHMITT, *ibid.*, with earlier literature.

Khirbet Tibneh and Sheikh Abu Zarad. And indeed, it was recently suggested that it might be located at Farkha (map reference 1641 1640), a village situated north of Wadi Sarida, almost halfway between Khirbet Tibneh and Sheikh Abu Zarad¹⁰. The village is situated on a high hill, in a place that controls a track that crosses the deep wadi and connects Khirbet Tibneh and the Beth-horon-Jerusalem road with the main road leading from Shechem to Jerusalem. Sherds of all periods from Iron Age I up to the Byzantine period were collected at the site, including pottery of the Hellenistic period¹¹. The linguistic affinity of the names Pharathon and Farkha (a loss of the *-ōn* ending and the *-t*-of the feminine) is self evident. The location of the site, its strategic position along the line of Wadi Sarida, the ceramic evidence and the preservation of the ancient name -- all these data support the identification of Farkha with the fortress of Pharathon built by Bacchides after the battle with Jonathan the Maccabaeus.

The site of Farkha similarly fits well with the available data of biblical Pirathon. It is located within the inheritance of Ephraim as is stated in Judg 12:15 and is close to Khirbet Tibneh, south of which was born Hiddai/Hurai of Nahale Gaash, who is mentioned alongside Benaiah of Pirathon in the list of David's officers.

We may further note that burial places of ancestors located in the southern part of the hill country of Ephraim are quite common in biblical tradition. For example: Deborah near Bethel (Gen 35:8); Joshua in Timnath-heres (Josh 24:30; Judg 2:9); Eleazar son of Aaron "in Gibeah, the town of Pinehas his son" (Josh 24:33; see Judg 20:28); Samuel in Ramah (1Sam 25:1). It is reasonable to assume that these tombs were the sources for many of the stories that appear in the Old Testament and must have originated from the people who were living in the area of these burial places. Abdon's memory (Judg 12:13-15) was likewise remembered because of the legends that have been told about him near his tomb in Pirathon, and he was thus included within the list of "minor judges" in the book of Judges¹².

The town of Pirathon was located *bhr h'mlqy* (Judg 12:15). The site of Farkha is located in the centre of the hill country of Ephraim, ca. 13 km.

10 SAFRAI (above, n. 3), 61-62.

11 I. FINKELSTEIN, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, Jerusalem 1988, 167-68.

12 N.P. LEMCHE, *The Judges - Once More*, BN 20 (1983) 54-55.

west of Shiloh, the most important sanctuary of Ephraim in the pre-monarchical period. The various theories of scholars that a considerable Amalekite group lived for a long time in the area of *hr h^amlqy* ("mount of the Amalekites"), near Pirathon, and that Saul's campaign against the Amalekites (1Sam 14:48; 15) was conducted in this area are, in my opinion, untenable¹³. An Amalekite group may well have camped or lived near Pirathon at some time, the area was subsequently called after this group (compare Judg 4:11, 17; 6:33; 7:8, 12; 8:18). The remarkable name of this central area in the inheritance of Ephraim may well have roused the imagination of the poet who composed the "eulogy" of the ten tribes in Judg 5:14-17, thus emphasizing that Ephraim's roots have been "in Amalek" (v. 14)¹⁴. But the existence of such a name is a poor basis for a hypothesis about Amalekite group that lived, up to the time of Saul, in the centre of Mount Ephraim, not far away from Shiloh, and can hardly support the far fetched theory, diametrically opposite to the story in 1Sam 15, according to which Saul's Amalekite campaign was conducted northward, to the area of Pirathon.

II

The disassociation of Pirathon from the site of Far^Cata may well open the way for a better identification of Ophrah/Ophrath, the village of Gideon (Judg 6). The various suggestions of locating Ophrah either at Ramoth Issachar¹⁵, in the Jezreel Valley¹⁶ or in the northern Sharon area¹⁷ are all

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- 13 H.J. ZOBEL, *Stamnesspruch und Geschichte* (BZAW 95), Berlin 1965, 45-46; H. CAZELLES, Déborah (Jud. V 14), *Amaleq et Mâkir*, VT 24 (1974) 235-38; D. EDELMAN, Saul's Battle against Amaleq (1Sam 15), JSOT 35 (1986), 71-84. See also K.H. BERNHARDT, *Das Problem der altorientalischen Königs-ideologie im Alten Testament* (SVT 8), Leiden 1961, 150-51, n. 6; J.A. SOGGIN, *Amalek und Ephraim*, Richter 5,14, ZDPV 98 (1982) 59-60.
- 14 This explanation for the depiction of Ephraim is particularly appealing if the "eulogy" is in reality a subtle satire of the northern tribes, as was suggested by A. CAQUOT, *Les tribus d'Israël dans le Cantique de Débora* (Juges 5,13-17), *Semitica* 36 (1986) 47-70.
- 15 F.M. ABEL, *Afrabalā-Forbelet et l'Ophra de Gédéon*, JPOS 17 (1937) 31-44; id., *Géographie* (above, n. 2), II, 60, 402-03; AHARONI (above, n. 2), 240-41, 382.
- 16 Z. KALLAI, *Ophrah*, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, VI, Jerusalem 1971, 324-25 (Hebrew); id. (above, n. 4), 422-24 and note 202.
- 17 W.F. ALBRIGHT, *The Site of Tirzah and the Topography of Western Manasseh*, JPOS 11 (1931) 247-50; Z. GAL, *The Settlement of Issachar: Some New Observations*, Tel Aviv 9 (1982) 82-83.

untenable because of their great distance from the district of Abiezer, where Gideon's clan lived. The key for the latter are the Samaria Ostraca that, as early as 1931 were discussed by W.F. ALBRIGHT when he was looking for the site of Ophrah¹⁸. Three Abiezerite villages that are mentioned in the ostraca are identifiable: Elmatan ('lmtn) with Immatin; Tawil (twl) with Till; and Beerayim (b'rym) with Burin¹⁹. Noteworthy also is that the seat of Abimelech, Gideon's son and heir, was at Arumah (Judg 9:41) and that he ruled the city of Shechem through Zebul, his official (Judg 9:28, 30, 41). The situation as reflected in the story is typical of the relations of a tribe and a major city that is located in its territory. The leader of the tribe lived within his clan, which is the source of his power and leadership, and indirectly supervised the city, in a way that would restrain its ambition for independence and power. Abimelech's seat, Arumah, is unanimously identified with Khirbet el-Urmeh, situated 14 km. south-east of Shechem, where Iron Age I pottery was uncovered²⁰. The district of Abiezer was located south of Shechem, extending between Immatin in the west and Khirbet el-Urmeh in the east.

H. ESHEL has recently suggested identifying Ophrah at Khirbet ^CAufar (map reference 1715 1780), 6 km. south-west of Shechem²¹. There is, however, as yet no archaeological proof for the proposal. It seems preferable to identify Ophrah/Ophrath with the village of Far^Cata. Iron Age pottery was collected on the site²², although an extensive survey of the place is yet to be desired, particularly since the old site is covered today by a modern Arab village which is always an obstacle for areal surveys. The town of Ophrah/Ophratha is mentioned several times in Samaritan sources, its place was clearly situated in the area of Shechem²³. Noteworthy is the Samaritan MS

18 ALBRIGHT, *Ibid.*, 250-51.

19 For the identification, see ALBRIGHT, *ibid.*; A. LEMAIRE, *Inscriptions hébraïques, I. Les ostraca*, Paris 1977, 56-59, 65.

20 For the survey in Khirbet el-Urmeh, see Z. KALLAI, *The Land of Benjamin and Mt. Ephraim*, in M. KOCHAVI (ed.), *Judaea, Samaria and the Golan, Archaeological Survey 1967-1968*, Jerusalem 1972, 168, no. 32; FINKELSTEIN (above, n. 11), 149; K. JAROŠ and B. DECKERT, *Studien zur Sichem Area (OBO 11a)*, Freiburg und Göttingen 1977, 24.

21 H. ESHEL, *The Possible Location of Ophra, Town of Gideon*, *Cathedra* 22 (1982) 3-8 (Hebrew).

22 KALLAI (above, n. 20), 167, no. 20.

23 Z.H. ERLICH, *Further Evidence for the Possible Location of Ophra, Town of Gideon*, at Khirbet ^CAufar, *Cathedra* 28 (1983) 151-54 (Hebrew).

in which it is explicitly stated "Ophratha (*ʿprth*) that is known even today as Ophratha (*ʿprth*)²⁴. It is thus clear that biblical Ophrah was identified by the Samaritans with a place called Ophratha, an identification which would explain the interchange of the names Ophrah and Ophratha/Kiriath Ophratha in the Samaritan Chronicle Tolidah and in the Samaritan Sefher Jehoshua²⁵. The name Ophratha was still in use in the early Islamic period, when the text was written. It was subsequently metathesized (*ʿprth* > *prʿth*), apparently in order to substitute a name of bad import. Its identification with the village of Far^Cata, which was settled in the Byzantine, early Islamic and Medieval periods²⁶, is thus self evident.

We may conclude that Far^Cata has all the essential features for the identification with biblical Ophrah/Ophrath²⁷. It is also clear that had it not been identified since the early days of modern research with Pirathon, thus having been marked by a certain name, it would have been identified long ago with Gideon's village. Mistaken old identifications may be a serious obstacle in the way of biblical research. Correcting them may well help us to clarify various topographical and historical problems that as yet remain to be solved in future studies.

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- 24 A.D. CROWN, A Critical Re-Evaluation of the Samaritan Sefher-Jehoshua, II (PhD Thesis), Sidney 1966, 83.
- 25 C.B. CONDER, Samaritan Topography, PEQ (1876) 190, 196-97; E.N. ADLER and M. SELIGSOHN, Une nouvelle chronique Samaritaine, Paris 1903, 22 and n. 4, 23 and n. 2; CROWN, *ibid.*; ERLICH (above, n. 23), 153-54.
- 26 KALLAI (above, n. 20), 167, no. 20.
- 27 The identification of Far^Cata with biblical Ophrah has already been suggested by CONDER and KITCHENER on the basis of the description in Judg 6-9 and the Samaritan chronicles. See C.R. CONDER and H.H. KITCHENER, The Survey of Western Palestine - Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography and Archaeology, II, London 1882, 162-63.