The ancient city of Azekah was an important site situated in the heart of the lowlands (the »Shephelah«). The site’s size and strategic location positioned it as one of the main gates between the coast and the highlands. Already during the Middle and the Late Bronze Ages, Azekah was a wealthy and prosperous place, with an economic focus on craft production, agricultural products, and a central role within trade.

Despite the size and importance of the site, the name »Azekah« is mentioned neither in any second-millennium BCE source nor in any extra-biblical source prior to the time of Assyrian rule. In this article, we argue that Azekah received its name only in the late 9th and 8th centuries BCE, when the Judahite kings gained control over the central Shephelah. Prior to this time, the site had a different name: Moresheth Gath, known from the Hebrew Bible as the hometown of the prophet Micah.

In the following, we explain our approach by providing a short history of Azekah based on recent archaeological and textual insights. We then discuss the controversial issue of the identification of Moresheth Gath in scholarship, and we detail our new theory that »Moresheth Gath« was the earlier name of Azekah.

1 Azekah through the Ages

Tel Azekah (Tell Zakariya) is a pear-shaped mound with a size of ca. 4.5 hectares. The mound sits ca. 127 meters above the Nahal Ha-Elah (Wādi ‘Ajur), which encircles the site on three sides and creates steep slopes to the west, north, and east. On the southern side, at a drop of ca. 30 meters, the tell connects to the Azekah-Goded Ridge via a low saddle. A lower city was built along the southern slopes of this saddle during the Late Bronze Age, which added 1.3 hectares to its size.
The Azekah-Goded Ridge splits the Shephelah into two parts: the lower Shephelah to the west and the higher Shephelah to the east. The ridge also regulated and safeguarded the strategic junction of roads that led from Tell es-Safi (biblical Gath) in the west, through the Elah Valley to the Judean highlands in the east, and connected Azekah to Beth Shemesh in the north and to Lachish in the south. Both the size and the strategic location of Azekah in the heart of the Shephelah situated it as one of the main border sites between the coastal entities in the west (e.g., the Philistines) and the entities in the hill country to the east (e.g., Judah).

The excavations of the Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition (ongoing since 2012) have revealed a long occupational history of the site through the exploration of 19 levels of settlement, from the Early Bronze through to the Umayyad period.¹ The site was especially strong, heavily fortified, rich in material culture, and densely populated in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages as well as in the Iron IIB and IIC.

Throughout all these periods, the significance, power, and wealth of Azekah was closely connected to the nearby city of Gath, which was one of the most dominant cities in the area throughout extended periods during the Late Bronze Age and the Iron I–IIA.² At times, Azekah and Gath coexisted side by side as independent entities. Yet, for longer periods of time, Azekah was under the rule of Gath. During short phases, when Gath was destroyed, abandoned, or existed as a weak political entity, Azekah was able to develop on its own as a major local center in the heart of the Shephelah.

In the Late Bronze Age, and likely already in the Middle Bronze, the Shephelah and the inner coastal plain were the most densely settled areas of the region.³ The socio-political organization of the region was based on the segmentation of the land by small clans located around major cities,⁴ with an inner social structure that

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¹ Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot and Manfred Oeming, »Tel Azekah 113 Years After: Preliminary Evaluation of the Renewed Excavations at the Site«, NEA 75 (2012) 196–212; idem, »Four Seasons of Excavations at Tel Azekah: The Expected and (Especially) Unexpected Results«, in The Shephelah during the Iron Age: Recent Archaeological Studies, ed. Oded Lipschits and Aren M. Maeir (Winona Lake, IN Eisenbrauns, 2017) 1–25.
³ Na’aman, »Shephelah«: 281.
was grounded in a hierarchy of kinship and household relations. Azekah held an important role within this system as one of the largest and most important cities that existed in the entire region.

During the Middle Bronze Age, Azekah enjoyed complete dominance over the landscape as well as a high level of connectivity with the fertile valleys of the Shephelah, the Judean highlands, and the coastal plain. During this time, Gath appears to have covered some 8 settled hectares, while Azekah covered around 5 hectares. It seems that Azekah and Gath were among the first sites in the center of the lowlands to fortify their cities (probably during the Middle Bronze II). The impressive Middle Bronze walls of the two sites are also technically very similar. This leads to the conclusion that during this period, Azekah and Gath were independent entities, with both likely being part of a network of fortified sites in the Shephelah that lacked internal hierarchy.

This situation radically changed during the Late Bronze Age. As can be gleaned from the Amarna archive, Gath of the 14th century BCE (theLate Bronze II A) was a local center and the capital of a Canaanite city-state. In all likelihood, Azekah was ruled by Gath in this period and was an important place of specialist craft production and trade. The settlement at Azekah was no longer restricted to the fortified Middle Bronze area on the top of the mound; remains of buildings with many finds, well dated to this period, were unearthed in all excavated areas. Gath’s rule over...
Azekah stemmed neither from the strength of the city nor from the might of its rulers but rather from Gath’s ability to monopolize Egyptian support and create strong alliances with elite families in the region. It was likely an Egyptian decision to centralize power into the hands of only few city rulers who, in turn, served as Egyptian governors. Thus, Gezer, Gath, Lachish, and possibly Beth Shemesh were long-term and well-established centers that hosted the seats of temporary charismatic leaders and families who utilized political circumstances in order to gain power.

These conditions continued into the 13th century BCE. Gath was still the dominant site in the region. The estimated size of Gath (27 hectares) significantly exceeded that of Azekah (6 hectares), which clearly speaks for the assumption that Azekah belonged to the territory of Gath. New buildings, specially decorated pottery, and imported goods all demonstrate that Azekah also flourished during this time.\(^\text{10}\)

The end of the 13th and the beginning of the 12th centuries BCE were a time of political instability throughout the entire region. Whatever the primary reason may be – the invasion of the »Sea Peoples« or internal regional processes – many sites were destroyed and depopulated. Gath was one of the settlements that collapsed and was probably abandoned by the end of the 13th century BCE.\(^\text{11}\) However, unlike Gath, Azekah survived until the end of the 12th century BCE. The decline of Gath may have even benefitted Azekah, as numerous finds attest to the site now being home to a prosperous town. Azekah was a local center with large commercial buildings such as the compound unearthed on the top of the tell, in which large amounts of vessels and luxury goods were found.\(^\text{12}\) The many Egyptian objects testify to direct contact and political relations with Egyptian rule.

Yet, when the Egyptians retreated from the region in the last third of the 12th century BCE, Azekah lost this crucial sponsorship and support. Without its valuable connections, the site fell victim to a great devastation, likely by an unknown aggressor. Ironically, it was during the strongest settlement phase of its history that Azekah was brutally destroyed and left in ruins for the next 250–300 years.

It was not until the end of the Iron Age IIA (towards the end of the 9th century BCE) that people were able to return to Azekah and resettle the mound.\(^\text{13}\) In all

\(^{10}\) Gadot, Kleiman and Lipschits, »A Tale of Two Cities«: 211.

\(^{11}\) See ibid.


\(^{13}\) Lipschits, Gadot and Oeming, »Four Seasons of Excavations«: 13 f.
likelihood, the new inhabitants of Azekah were descendants of the former population who survived the destruction and continued to live in the Elah Valley. These people now rebuilt Azekah, clearing parts of the remains from the destroyed Late Bronze city and building their houses at almost the same level, only a few centimeters above the ancient destruction.

During this period, as in the Late Bronze Age, Azekah was under the rule of Gath, which now was in the hands of the Philistines. It was only at the end of the 9th century BCE (Iron IIB), after Hazael, king of Damascus, destroyed Gath ca. 830 BCE (2Kgs 12:18), that the Shephelah, and with it Azekah, became part of Judah. This again awarded the site new significance. Azekah was now a Judahite fort that secured the western border of Judah and especially protected the entrance to the hill country via the Elah Valley.

The strategic and military significance of Azekah at the western border of Judah is also documented in Assyrian sources. During Sennacherib's third military campaign, which ended with targeting Hezekiah of Judah (701 BCE), the Assyrian king destroyed Azekah and extoled himself for this deed in the so-called »Azekah Inscription« – the first extrabiblical evidence to mention the name »Azekah«: 
»The city of Azekah, his stronghold, which is between my [bo]rder and the land of Judah [... like the nest of the eagle?] located on a mountain ridge, like pointed iron? daggers without number reaching high to heaven ... [The city of Azekah I besieged.]
I captured, I carried off its spoil, I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire ...[«

After its destruction in 701 BCE, a significantly diminished Azekah was rebuilt sometime in the late 7th century BCE (Iron IIC). As demonstrated by both biblical and extrabiblical sources, the site once again became one of the strong, fortified cities located on Judah's western Shephelite border. Jeremiah 34:7 reads as follows:
»The army of the king of Babylon fought against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah: for these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah.« An ostracon discovered in the burned gate of Lachish, dated to the 586 BCE Babylonian destruction, completes the data provided by the description in Jeremiah. Here, the final Judahite defenders report (Lachish Ostracon IV): »And let (my lord) know that we are watching for the fire signals of

14 For the debate on the destruction of Gath by Hazael of Damascus, see, e.g., Aren M. Maeir, »Philistine Gath after 20 Years: Regional Perspectives on the Iron Age at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi/Gath«, in The Shephelah during the Iron Age, ed. Lipschits and idem, 133–154: 139–142, with further literature.
15 Lipschits, Gadot and Oeming, »Four Seasons of Excavations«: 14–16.
Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah.«

Thus, Azekah was a significant site through the ages. It was an important fortification on the western border of the Shephelah that was economically strong and prosperous. It is therefore remarkable that extra-biblical sources do not document the name »Azekah« prior to the Assyrian period, when Azekah was already part of the kingdom of Judah.

In our view, the reason for this is that Azekah was named such only by Judahite rulers when it became a part of their territory. Prior to this point, Azekah was known by another name – »Moresheth Gath«.

2 The Identification of Moresheth Gath

Scholars have long debated the location of biblical Moresheth Gath. The Hebrew Bible mentions this place three times: Micah 1:1 and Jeremiah 26:18 introduce Micah as a Moreshtite; Mic 1:14 refers to the fate of Moresheth Gath. Based on Mic 1, which addresses several towns in the Shephelah, it is obvious that Moresheth Gath should also be sought in this region. Nonetheless, the concrete identification of the prophet’s hometown is still far from clear.

Previous research on the identification of Moresheth Gath has relied primarily on evidence from early Christian sources. Eusebius, Jerome, and other ancient writers locate this place in the vicinity of Eleutheropolis/Beth Guvrin. On this basis, scholars commonly suppose that Moresheth Gath lay in the Guvrin Valley. In an influential article from 1933, Joachim Jeremias was the first to identify Moresheth Gath with Tel Goded,18 and many have, until recently, adopted this hypothesis.19 Other scholars accept the basic idea that Moresheth Gath was located in the Guvrin Valley but suggest other sites in this area: Aapeli Saarisalo identified Moresheth

18 Joachim Jeremias, »Moreseth-Gath, die Heimat des Propheten Micha«, Palästinajahrbuch 29 (1933) 42–53.
Gath with Tell el-Beda, Shmuel Vargon and Israel Finkelstein with Tel Burna, and Nadav Na’an with Tel Zayit. The only scholar who has sought Moresheth Gath outside of the Guvrin Valley and instead, due to its name, considered a place closer to Gath (Tell es-Safi), is Yigal Levin, who identifies Moresheth Gath with Tel Harasim, northwest of Gath.

![Fig. 1: The Shephelah (map prepared by Assaf Kleiman)](image)

In the following, we discuss evidence of Moresheth Gath in early Christian sources, the Amarna letters, and the book of Micah, and then present our new proposal for the identification of this place.

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22 Na’an, »Shephelah«: 284 f.
2.1 Moresheth Gath in Early Christian Sources

Current hypotheses regarding the identification of Moresheth Gath largely rely on the evidence of early Christian sources.\(^\text{24}\) Several texts from the early Christian period and the early Middle Ages mention the home of the prophet Micah. All of these texts locate this place in the vicinity of, or in the broader surroundings of, Eleutheropolis – the name of Beth Guvrin in Roman and Byzantine times.

The earliest evidence of such a location stems from Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 265–340). In his *Onomasticon*, an alphabetical list of biblical place names, he notes: »Mora[s]thei, where Micah the prophet came from, east of Eleutheropolis« [Μωρασθεί, ὅθεν ἦν Μιχαῖας ὁ προφήτης πρὸς ἀνατολὰς Ἐλευθεροπόλεως].\(^\text{25}\)

Further insights can be gained from the early church historians. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen (ca. 380–440) refers to a legend about the discovery of the bones of the prophets Habakkuk and Micah\(^\text{26}\) and writes that Zebennus, the bishop of Eleutheropolis, received a divine vision about the location of the prophets’ bodies. The bones of Habakkuk were then found at »Kela, the city formerly called Keilah« [Κελὰ, ἡ πρὶν Κείλα ὀνομαζομένη πόλις].\(^\text{27}\) Micah’s remains were found in »Berathsatia, a place around 10 stadia away from the city« [Βηραθσατία χωρίον ἀμφὶ δέκα στάδια τῆς πόλεως διεστώς].\(^\text{28}\) Thus, Sozomen locates the home of Micah 10 stadia (approx. 2 kilometers) from Keilah, east of Eleutheropolis.\(^\text{29}\)


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 1505.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 1505–1507.

\(^{29}\) Jeremias, »Moreseth-Gath«: 47, claimed that Sozomen locates Micah’s home 2 kilometers from Eleutheropolis, not from Keilah – which would fit better with the other ancient sources. Several scholars, such as Elliger, »Heimat«: 120; Procksch, »Gat«: 180; Schmitt, »Moreschet Gat«: 154; Jericke, »Moreschet-Gat« adopted this, probably without further verification. Jeremias’ view is, however, based on a misinterpretation. The term πόλις in the sentence about Micah’s burial place doubtlessly refers back to the πόλις of Kela/Keilah in the previous sentence and not to Eleutheropolis, which is mentioned (without the term πόλις) two sentences before. For the interpretation advocated here, see already Peter Thomsen, *Loca Sancta: Verzeichnis der im 1. bis 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr. erwähnten Ortschaften Palästinas mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lokalisation der biblischen Stätten* (Halle: Haupt, 1907), 42, and the (rather free, but correct) English translation of Sozomen’s *History* by Edward Walford, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen* (London: Bohn, 1855), 358: »The tomb of Micah was discovered at a distance of ten stadia from Cela.«
same legend is found in the *Chronographia* of Theophanes the Confessor (ca. 765–818), who, however, more generally says that the bones of Habakkuk and Micah were found »at two places in the vicinity of Eleutheropolis« \(\text{ἐν δυσὶ χωρίοις τῆς περιοίκιδος Ἐλευθεροπόλεως}\).\(^{30}\)

Further evidence of Micah’s hometown can be found in the work of Jerome (ca. 347–420). In the prologue to his commentary on the book of Micah, Jerome includes a short note about »Morasthi, which even today is a village, not too large, next to the city of Eleutheropolis in Palestine« \[Morasthi, qui usque hodie iuxta Eleutheropolim urbem Palaestinae haud grandis est uiculus\].\(^{31}\) More concrete is the evidence in Jerome’s *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*, in which he details the life of the Roman lady Paula and her pilgrimage to the Holy Land.\(^{32}\) In this context, Jerome describes Paula’s journey from Jerusalem to Egypt, listing several places lying on her path. Coming from Socho and the »Source of Samson«, Paula passes through »Morasthi, once the tomb of the prophet Micah, now a church« \[Morasthi, sepulcrum quondam Micheae prophetae, nunc ecclesiam\].\(^{33}\) After this, she arrives to the area of the »Chorraeos et Gethaeos«, which is probably the region of Eleutheropolis,\(^{34}\) and to Maresha. Jerome’s *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* thus locates Micah’s home between Socho and Maresha, which once again points to the vicinity of Eleutheropolis, but now to the area north of the city.

Comparable findings appear on the Madaba Map (6th century CE),\(^{35}\) which records a place »Morasthi whence Micah the prophet came« \[Μορασθὶ ὅθεν ἦν Μιχαίας ὁ προφ[ήτης]\]. North of this place, the Madaba Map shows Bethzachar (Beth Zacharia) and Socho and south of it a bigger town whose inscription is lost – probably Eleutheropolis.\(^{36}\) One last piece of ancient evidence stems from the 12th century CE. In his *Liber de locis sanctis*, Peter the Deacon (ca. 1107–1153) writes: »From Eleutheropolis ... at the third milestone, at this place called Chariassati, but


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 324.

\(^{34}\) See Jeremias, »Moreseth-Gath«: 48.


previously called Morastites, is the tomb of the holy prophet Micah« [Ab Eleutheropolis ... in miliario tertio in loco, qui dicitur Chariassati, quod ante dictum est autem Morastites, est sepulchrum sancti Micheae prophetae]. Consequently, Peter the Deacon locates Micah's home approx. 4.5 kilometers from Eleutheropolis.

The ancient Christian sources thus all locate Moresheth Gath, the home of Micah, in the vicinity of Eleutheropolis/Beth Guvrin. Together with the fact that in earlier research, Gath was identified with Tel Erani (ʻIraq el-Menshiyeh) in the western part of the Guvrin Valley, Joachim Jeremias and many others were led to seek Moresheth Gath in exactly this area. They identified Moresheth Gath with Tel Goded, Tell el-Beda, Tel Burna, or Tel Zayit.

Nevertheless, the evidence from ancient Christian sources is highly problematic in several regards. Firstly, upon closer inspection, the ancient sources reveal striking differences in where exactly they locate Micah's hometown. Eusebius locates Moresheth east of Eleutheropolis, which could fit with Sozomen's note that Micah's tomb was found 2 kilometers from Keilah. However, according to Jerome, Moresheth lay on the way from Socho to Maresha, which points to the area north of Eleutheropolis. The Madaba Map also locates the home of the prophet in this area. Thus, the ancient sources do not present a consistent view on the concrete location of Moresheth Gath.

This insight leads to the assumption that the ancient sources are not anchored in a common tradition. Rather, it seems that in the early Christian period, there were different traditions circulating about the location of Moresheth Gath. Additionally, it is highly likely that none of these traditions trace back to earlier periods. Instead, all of these traditions are the result of later reflections on the biblical book of Micah. In Mic 1:13–15, Moresheth Gath is mentioned among several other (more well-known) towns in the Shephelah: Lachish, Mareshah, Achzib, and Adullam. Based on the book of Micah, it must have been obvious in the early Christian period that Moresheth Gath is located in exactly this area.

That the early Christian sources indeed do not rely upon earlier local traditions but rather on such reflections on the book of Micah can be evidenced with one further observation. All sources, if they mention the name of Micah's hometown, do not refer to this place as »Moresheth«. Instead, they call it »Morasthei« (Euse-

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38 Jeremias, »Moreseth-Gath«: 43; Elliger, »Heimat«: 119; Wolff, *Micha*, 4; et al. For the old identification of Gath with Tel Erani/ʻIraq el-Menshiyeh, see, e.g., Albright, »Contributions to the Historical Geography of Palestine«, *AASOR* 2/3 (1921/22) 1–46: 7–12.

39 Thus, already Schmitt, »Moreschet Gat«: 156 f.

40 See ibid.: 157.
Oded Lipschits, Jakob Wöhrle

Thus, all ancient sources read the name of the town with a final -i that was not part of the original place name »Moresheth«. In all likelihood, this final -i traces back to Mic 1:1, which introduced the prophet as »Micah ha-Morashti« [מכה מרחתי; מיכה המרשתי]. Here, the -i at the end of the Hebrew place name »Moresheth« is certainly a gentilic -i used to designate the residents of a place, in this case a »Moreshtite«. However, even the Septuagint did not understand the final -i of Morashti in Mic 1:1 as a gentilic -i but rather as part of the place name: »Micah from Morashti« [Μιχαὴλ τὸν τοῦ Μωρασθῆ]. The same misunderstanding lies behind the early Christian sources: Based on Mic 1:1, the ancient authors thought that the name of Micah's home was »Morashti«. This strongly supports the assumption that the ancient Christian sources did not rely on earlier local traditions and were working instead with later reflections on the book of Micah.

Finally, it is quite clear why, in the early Christian period, such reflections on Micah's hometown pointed to the vicinity of Eleutheropolis/Beth Guvrin. In the Byzantine period, after the »Constantinian shift« in which Christianity became a legal-ized and state-supported religion in the Roman empire and thus also in Palestine, Eleutheropolis became the seat of a bishop and the center of the largest diocese in the region.41 It is conceivable that in this time, legends arose that demonstrated the significance of this city. Sozomen's story concerning the bishop of Eleutheropolis receiving a divine vision that led to the discovery of Micah's bones near his seat is one such legend. Jerome's note that there was a church for Micah the prophet near Eleutheropolis points in this same direction. Such a memorial site for a biblical prophet certainly gave importance to the whole region. The new significance of Eleutheropolis as a regional center in Byzantine Palestine, and not an old tradition, led to the identification of Moresheth Gath within its environs.

The early Christian sources thus prove not to be reliable witnesses for the identification of Moresheth Gath. These sources do not trace back to earlier local traditions; they are instead based on reflections from the book of Micah and aim at awarding significance to the city of Eleutheropolis as a local center and bishopric in Byzantine Palestine. Unlike previous research, the identification of Moresheth Gath must thus be built on different, more solid foundations.

2.2 Mu’rashtu in the Amarna Letters (EA 335)

The earliest evidence of Moresheth Gath can be found in the Amarna texts from the Late Bronze Age (14th century BCE). In EA 335, Abdi-Ashtarti, ruler of an unnamed Canaanite city-state, complains to the Egyptian king about hostile activity in his territory and demands for the king to intervene. In this context, the letter reads (335:14–18): 42

May the king, my lord, know
that the city of Lakishu is hostile,
the city of Mu’rashtu [URU Mu-ú-ra-aš-ti] is taken.

Since the discovery of the Amarna letters, scholars have often suggested that the »Mu’rashtu« mentioned in EA 335 is none other than Micah’s Moresheth Gath. 43 This remains the most likely assumption. Firstly, on a more general level, the name »Mu’rashtu« corresponds to »Moresheth«. The spelling of the word »Mu’rashtu« with an ’aleph after the prefixed nominalizing mem can be well explained as an Akkadianized form of the West Semitic »Moresheth«. 44

Additionally, the origin of Amarna letter EA 335 is significant. From combining data from several Amarna texts, scholars have long proposed that Abdi-Ashtarti was the ruler of Gath. 45 This assumption has been substantiated by petrographic analysis. 46 The clay used for this and other tablets written by Abdi-Ashtarti stems from Tell es-Safi, which current research generally identifies with ancient Gath. 47

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43 Thus, already Hermann Clauß, »Die Städte der El-Amarnabriefe und die Bibel«, *ZDPV* 30 (1907) 1–79: 43 f. Cf. also Schmitt, »Moreshet Gath«: 160; Shmuel Vargon, »El-Amarna Mu’rašt and Biblical Moresheth«, in *Bar-Ilan Studies in Assyriology Dedicated to Pinḥas Arzi*, ed. Jacob Klein and Aaron Skaist (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1990) 207–212; Levin, »Search«: 31; Na’a’man, »Shephelah«: 284.

44 Vargon, »El-Amarna«: 207–212.


This therefore indicates that Abdi-Ashtarti was the ruler of Gath, which in turn strongly speaks for the assumption that the »Mu’rashtu« mentioned in his letter is the biblical Moresheth Gath.

The equation of Mu’rashtu in EA 335 with Moresheth Gath has certain consequences for the identification of the town. First, the evidence in the Amarna texts shows that Moresheth Gath existed already in the Late Bronze Age, meaning that it cannot be identified with places that were not inhabited in this early period.48 This obvious conclusion especially speaks against the still-common identification of Moresheth Gath with Tel Goded,49 which was not settled during the Late Bronze Age.50

Moreover, the name of the town needs to be considered as well. Although sometimes rejected, the name »Mu’rashtu«/»Moresheth« is still best explained as a nominal term based on the West Semitic root yrš »to inherit«.51 The noun »Mu’rashtu«/»Moresheth« thus means »the inheritance«. Since such a name does not make sense without further indication of whose inheritance this place would be, it is quite probable that already in the Late Bronze Age, as in later periods, the name of the place was not simply »Mu’rashtu« but rather »Mu’rashtu/Moresheth Gath«, »the inheritance of Gath« – with »Mu’rashtu« being a short form of this name. Thus, in light of its name, it appears that Mu’rashtu was already in the Late Bronze inherited and ruled by the leaders of Gath. This consideration is also supported by the letter of Abdi-Ashtarti from Gath (EA 335), who complains about the loss of Mu’rashtu. This letter shows that Abdi-Ashtarti regarded Mu’rashtu as part of his domain. Mu’rashtu must therefore be located within the territory of the Late Bronze Canaanite city-state of Gath.

49 See above, notes 18 f.
51 As already claimed by Jeremias, »Moreseth-Gath«: 43, and more recently by Levin, »Search«: 30; Na’aman, »Shephelah«: 285; et al. Some scholars suppose that the name »Moresheth« is based on the root ūrš »to demand«, »to wish«; cf. Elliger, »Heimat«: 118 f.; Vargon, »El-Amarna«: 211. However, since the term »inheritance« is well attested in Biblical Hebrew (Exod 6:8; Deut 33:4; Ezek 11:15; 25:4, 10; 33:24; 36:2, 3, 5) and since the ancient versions already interpreted the name »Moresheth« in Mic 1:14 in exactly this way (LXX: κηρονομία; V: hereditas), the old derivation from the root yrš seems much more likely.
The territorial political system of Canaanite city-states is, however, a matter of much debate. Particularly controversial are the exact number of city-states within Canaan and the concrete areas over which the individual city-states ruled. In regard to the Shephelah, it is quite clear that Gath was the center of one such Canaanite city-state. What is unclear, however, is the territorial expansion of the city-state of Gath, especially with regard to the Guvrin Valley, where, as mentioned above, many scholars locate Moresheth Gath. Israel Finkelstein, as one example, views the Guvrin Valley as part of the territory of Gath, while others, such as Nadav Na’aman, do not assign the Guvrin Valley to Gath.

The Amarna letters can offer insights into the territorial expansion of the Canaanite city-state of Gath. Besides Mu’rashtu, they mention one other town that the rulers of Gath viewed as part of their territory: Qiltu/Keilah. In EA 280, Shuwardata, likely the predecessor of Abdi-Ashtarti, complains about hostilities in Qiltu and refers to this place as »my city« [URU.KI-ia; EA 280:14]. Qiltu/Keilah is located to the southeast of Gath, in the eastern Shephelah. The direct route from Gath to Keilah leads through the Elah Valley. Thus, it seems highly probable that the main territory of Gath was in exactly this area, the area from Gath through the Elah Valley to Keilah, as the eastern border town of the Canaanite city-state of Gath. The Guvrin Valley was not a part of this territory – or at least, there is no indication in the Amarna letters of its affiliation with the territory of Gath.

The preceding considerations have important consequences for locating Mu’rashtu/Moresheth Gath: The town must be sought within the main territory of Gath and, thus, in the Elah Valley. Due to its name, it seems apparent that within this area, Mu’rashtu/Moresheth Gath lies close to Gath. Since Mu’rashtu is the only town other than Qiltu/Keilah that the rulers of Gath mention in the Amarna letters, it should be expected to be a place of economic and/or strategic significance.

52 See, for example, Nadav Na’aman, »Historical-Geographical Aspects of the Amarna Tablets«, in Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Bible Studies and Ancient Near East (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1988) 17–26; idem, »Shephelah«; Bunimovitz, »On the Edge of Empires«; Finkelstein, »Territorial-Political System«: 221–255; idem, »The Shephelah and Jerusalem’s Western Border in the Amarna Period«, AEL 24 (2014) 267–276; Stephen H. Savage and Steven E. Falconer, »Spatial and Statistical Inference of Late Bronze Age Polities in the Southern Levant«, BASOR 330 (2003) 31–45; Panitz-Cohen, »Southern Levant«.
53 Finkelstein, »Territorial-Political System«: esp. 232 f. and the map 255; idem, »Shephelah«: 265–268.
54 Na’aman, »Shephelah«: 282–286.
55 Na’aman, »Origin«: 682.
56 Thus, already Na’aman, »Shephelah«: 285 f. Based on analysis and calculation of archaeological settlement data, Savage and Falconer, »Spatial and Statistical Inference«: 37–43, come to comparable results.
There is only one such place in the Elah Valley that is near Gath and of economic and strategic significance: Azekah. This site is located in the immediate vicinity of Gath, only 7 kilometers to the east. During the Late Bronze Age, it was a prosperous town. The strategic importance of Azekah lies in its location at the western entrance of the Elah Valley. The site watches over and controls this entrance, thus making it the western counterpart to Keilah in the east. Together, these two towns secure the access to the Elah Valley as the main territory of the Canaanite city-state of Gath.

In contrast to the early Christian sources, the Amarna letters provide important insights for the identification of Moresheth Gath. The Amarna letters clearly show that Moresheth Gath existed already in the Late Bronze Age, which speaks against the common identification with Tel Goded. Additionally, the Amarna letters show that Moresheth Gath must have been within the main territory of the Canaanite city-state of Gath, which in all likelihood lay in the Elah Valley between Gath and Keilah. This speaks against other identifications of Moresheth Gath with towns in the Guvrin Valley such as Tell el-Beda, Tel Burna, or Tel Zayit as well as against the identification with Tel Ḥarasim to the northwest of Gath. Yet, based on the evidence in the Amarna letters, Azekah, which is close to Gath and sits at the strategically important western entrance to the Elah Valley, would be an ideal candidate for the identification of Moresheth Gath. This now leads us to the evidence in the book of Micah.

2.3 Moresheth Gath in the Book of Micah

The most important text for the identification of Moresheth Gath is, of course, the book of Micah. The heading of the book in Mic 1:1 presents the prophet as »Micah the Moreshtite« (cf. Jer 26:18). In the context of a comprehensive lament addressed to several towns in the Shephelah (Mic 1:10–16), Mic 1:14 mentions »Moresheth Gath«.

Previous research has worked extensively to identify Micah’s Moresheth Gath. As already discussed, scholars have analyzed the early Christian sources and reflected upon the reference to Mu’rashtu in the Amarna letters. Surprisingly however, they rarely, if ever, asked what the book of Micah itself says about Moresheth Gath and its possible location.

The lament in Mic 1:10–16 is of crucial importance for present purposes. This text reacts to the threat and destruction of several towns and cities in the Shephelah. The historical background of this text is without doubt the Assyrian campaign by

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57 See above, notes 20–23.
Sennacherib against Judah in 701 BCE. Several biblical and extra-biblical texts, as well as the archaeological record, show that Sennacherib caused massive destruction across the entire territory of Judah, and especially in the Shephelah, destroying and depopulating the whole region. Against this background, the lament in Mic 1:10–16, based on more or less understandable wordplays, calls for the people of several towns and cities in the Shephelah to accept their fate: They should mourn, flee, and prepare themselves for capture and fall.

Particularly remarkable are the concrete places mentioned in Mic 1:10–16. The entire text deals with ten places. Initially, Mic 1:10–12 refers to five unknown places not documented anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible: Beth Leaphrah, Shaphir, Zaanan, Beth Ezel, and Maroth. Then, Mic 1:13–16 addresses five places that are much better known and documented: Lachish, Moresheth Gath, Achzib, Mareshah, and Adullam.

The juxtaposition of such unknown place names with ones that are better known has led scholars to several speculations. Some have suggested that the prophet either invented the first five place names or at least manipulated and spoofed the names in order to create the wordplays around which the entire text is structured. Other scholars have supposed that these places are otherwise unknown because they were either not part of Judahite territory or because they

58 Nadav Na’aman, »The House-of-No-Shade Shall Take Away its Tax from You (Micah I 11)«, VT 45 (1995) 516–527: 523–527; Kessler, Micha, 102 f.; Jeremias, Propheten, 137; Daniel Smith-Christopher, Micah: A Commentary, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 71; Corzilius, Michas Rätsel, 142–146; et al. In earlier research, due to the reference to Samaria in Mic 1:6, some scholars claimed that the whole chapter (and thus also the lament in Mic 1:10–16) stemmed from the time before the downfall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE; cf. Karl Budde, »Das Rätsel von Micha 1«, ZAW 37 (1917/18) 77–108: 106 f.; Wolff, Micha, 22 f.; et al. However, this period offers no evidence of military activity in the Shephelah. Moreover, the reference to Samaria in Mic 1:6 is probably part of a later redaction of the chapter; cf. Jakob Wöhrle, Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches: Entstehung und Komposition, BZAW 360 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 140–142.

59 See, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na’aman, »The Judahite Shephelah in the Late 8th and Early 7th Centuries BCE«, TA 31 (2004) 60–79.

60 Not addressed here is the reference to Gath at the beginning of the lament in Mic 1:10. The statement »Tell it not in Gath« is a verbatim quotation from 2Sam 1:20. It is not aimed at specific events in Gath. As a kind of introductory note to the lament, it rather states that one’s own fate must be concealed. Cf. Jeremias, Propheten, 140; Smith-Christopher, Micah, 72; Corzilius, Michas Rätsel, 104 f.

were destroyed in 701 BCE and not rebuilt afterwards. All of these assumptions are, however, highly speculative.

In order to better understand Mic 1:10–16, it should first be noted that most of the places in the second part (1:13–16) are mentioned in other parts of the Hebrew Bible as sites of local importance, and especially as fortified cities. For example, in 2Chr 11:5–12, there is a list of fortified cities and thus a kind of Judahite fortification system. This list documents at least three of the towns from Mic 1:13–16 (Lachish, Mareshah, and Adullam). Hence, this second part of the lament reflects the fate of the fortified cities in the Shephelah.

In contrast, the place names of the first part of the lament (Mic 1:10–12), which are not attested anywhere else in the entire Hebrew Bible, may well refer to smaller, unfortified towns that also lay in the Shephelah. The places in this first part (Beth Leaphrah, Shaphir, Zaanan, Beth Ezel, and Maroth) are thus small towns, small villages, or even small peasantries in the Shephelah. This is why these places are not documented elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible; they were simply too small and unimportant.

This aligns with a second observation: The first and second parts of the lament differ in their temporal setting. The first part of the call to lament (1:10–12) refers to and reflects upon current events. The inhabitants of the villages and peasantries mentioned here are to mourn and lament over a fate with which they had already been met. The villages and peasantries have already been destroyed, some of the inhabitants of the towns flee, while others are dead.

Different from this is the second part of the lament (1:13–16), which refers to and reflects on future events. The fate of the towns in this second part has already been determined but has not yet come to pass. The inhabitants of these towns are to prepare themselves for military conflicts. They can be sure that their enemies will come and destroy them, but up to this point, the towns have not yet been destroyed and depopulated.

Thus, the first part of the lament (Mic 1:10–12) refers to events currently taking place in smaller villages or peasantries in the Shephelah, and the second part (1:13–
16) refers to events in the fortified cities that have not yet happened. The lament thus stems from, or at least imagines, the first part of the Assyrian campaign to the Shephelah, after the Assyrians had already destroyed the small unfortified villages and stood at the gates of the larger, fortified cities.

These insights into the structure and message of the lament in Mic 1:10–16 lead to one initial consequence for the identification of Moresheth Gath: This town was one of the larger and stronger cities of the region and part of Judah’s fortification system in the Shephelah.

Further information about Moresheth Gath can be gleaned from a closer look at the text of the lament. Significant in this regard are the two lines about Lachish and Moresheth Gath in Mic 1:13–14:

13 Harness the horse to the chariot, inhabitants of Lachish ...
14 ... Give [תתני] a parting gift [שׁלוחים] to Moresheth Gath.

Micah 1:13 speaks to the inhabitants of Lachish and calls on them to prepare their chariots. The subsequent verse 1:14 about Moresheth Gath begins with תָּתַנְי, a 2.f.sg. imperfect/jussive of נתן »she shall give«. As such, this verse calls for a female entity to give a »parting gift« [שׁלוחים] to Moresheth Gath. Scholars often emend this text to, for example, the 3.m.sg. imperfect יתן, understood in the sense of »one shall give«. Such emendations result in a text that refers to an undefined group of people who are to give a parting gift. However, the current form of the text is entirely unproblematic and is also attested by the Septuagint [δώσεις]. Consequently, the line about Moresheth Gath directly addresses and calls upon a female entity. In the present context, this female entity can only be the aforementioned city of Lachish. According to Mic 1:14a, Lachish shall give a parting gift to Moresheth Gath.

A »parting gift« [שׁלוחים] is a gift that either a father gives to his daughter once she leaves him for a marriage (1Kgs 9:16) or a man gives to his wife after a divorce (Exod 18:2). Such a »parting gift« is thus connected with the farewell and separation of formerly closely related partners (father and daughter; husband and wife). When Mic 1:14 calls Lachish to give such a parting gift to Moresheth Gath, the verse...
indicates the separation of Lachish from Moresheth Gath as such formerly closely related partners.

Thus, in our view, previous research regarding the identification of Moresheth Gath in the book of Micah has asked the wrong question: The question is not, »Which town in the proximity of Gath can be identified as Moresheth Gath?« The far more important question is, »Which town closely related to Lachish and, based on the preceding considerations, was itself a strong fortified town can be identified as Moresheth Gath?«

There is only one such fortified town in the proximity of Lachish that is closely related, and even somewhat of a »sister city«, to Lachish: Azekah! Both biblical and extra-biblical sources often mention Lachish and Azekah side by side. In the Hebrew Bible, the list in 2Chr 11 mentions Lachish and Azekah in a direct sequence (11:9). A list of place names in Neh 11 likewise refers to these places side by side (11:30). Finally, Jer 34:7 states that during the Babylonian attacks against Judah, the only fortified cities that remained were Lachish and Azekah. Among the extra-biblical texts, there is of course the famous Lachish Ostracon IV, which speaks about the different fates of Lachish and Azekah. Additionally, it is surely no coincidence that in Assyrian sources, Sennacherib extols himself for the destruction of two fortified cities during his campaign in 701 BCE: Lachish on the Lachish Reliefs and Azekah in the Azekah Inscription.

Lachish and Azekah are thus often mentioned alongside one another or, as in the previous example from Assyrian sources, at least appear as the two main fortified cities. The background and reason for this is simple: Lachish and Azekah were the two most important fortified cities in the Shephelah. These two cities controlled the western border of Judah – Lachish from the southwest and Azekah from the west – and thus together secured the western entrance to Judahite territory, especially to the highlands and its center in Jerusalem.

Thus, Mic 1:14 – because of the parting gift – presents Moresheth Gath as closely related to Lachish. This would make perfect sense if Moresheth Gath were indeed Azekah, which was Lachish’s sister city. As with and even more so than the evidence concerning Mu’rashtu in the Amarna texts, the findings in the book of Micah support the assumption that Moresheth Gath should be identified with Azekah.

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70 See above, note 17.
71 For the Lachish Reliefs, see, e. g., David Ussishkin, *Biblical Lachish: A Tale of Construction, Destruction, Excavation, and Restoration* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2014), 327–353, for the Azekah Inscription, see above, note 16.
Conclusion and Further Thoughts

A fresh look at the early Christian sources, the Amarna texts, and the book of Micah leads to the assumption that Azekah was none other than Moresheth Gath, the hometown of the prophet Micah. In all likelihood, Azekah is the new name of Moresheth Gath given to the city by Judahite rulers after taking control of the western Shephelah, not before the end of the 9th century BCE.

The practice of new rulers renaming conquered lands and towns has occurred throughout history. The Assyrians had already done so, and the same practice continues even today. In the present case, it is conceivable that the Judahite rulers did not keep the old name »Moresheth Gath«, since Gath no longer existed as the strong Philistine city and since Moresheth Gath was no longer the »inheritance of Gath« but now part of their own Judahite territory. Yet, the local population in the Shephelah, whose ancestors had lived there for centuries and who had stayed there after their territory became Judahite, continued to call their hometown by its old name. It is for this reason that the prophet Micah and the later tradents of the book still used the name »Moresheth Gath«, while other biblical sources, as well as the Assyrians, call it by its new name, »Azekah«.

If this assessment is correct and Azekah is indeed Moresheth Gath, the hometown of the prophet Micah, then the biblical book of Micah – or at least the oldest core of it – would be a historical source directly from this place. The book of Micah, together with the recent results of the excavation of Azekah, could then provide illuminating new insights into the social, economic, and religious circumstances of this place. But such considerations must be the subject of future research.

Abstract: This article deals with the oft-debated identification of Moresheth Gath, mentioned in the book of Micah as the prophet’s hometown. Based on comprehensive analysis of texts from the early Christian period, the Amarna archive and the book of Micah, the authors claim for the first time that Moresheth Gath is to be identified with Azekah, the economically and strategically important site in the western Shephelah. »Moresheth Gath« was the old name of the site before becoming part

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73 To give just one prominent example: the renaming of Byzantium to Constantinople and then to Istanbul.
74 Wöhrle, Sammlungen, 138–197.
of Judah at the end of the 9th century BCE, when the Judahite rulers renamed it »Azekah«.

Keywords: Azekah, Moresheth Gath, Shephelah, Micah, Biblical Geography


Schlagwörter: Aseka, Moreschet Gat, Schefela, Micha, Biblische Geographie

Résumé: Cet article traite de l'identification souvent débattue de Moresheth Gath, mentionnée dans le livre de Michée comme étant la ville natale du prophète. Sur la base d'une analyse de textes datant du début du christianisme, des archives d'Amarna et du livre de Michée, les auteurs affirment pour la première fois que Moresheth Gath doit être identifiée à Azekah, site économiquement et stratégiquement important de la Shephelah occidentale. « Moresheth Gath » était l'ancien nom du site avant de faire partie de Juda à la fin du IXe siècle av. J. C., lorsque les souverains judéens l'ont renommé « Azekah ».

Mots-clés: Azekah, Moreshet Gath, Shephelah, Michée, géographie biblique