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A decolonial reading of biblical toponymic practices and their relevance to South Africa

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This article is concerned with the contested role of renaming in influencing historical memory, authority, and geographic identity, especially within biblical toponymic practices and their contemporary resonance in South Africa. It cautions against romanticising renaming as either singularly restorative or symbolic, as the selected biblical texts suggest otherwise. Nested in decolonial reading as a theoretical concept, the article interrogates how language, through toponymic practices, is an epistemic site where power and historical memory are negotiated and recorded. Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31 are purposively selected as datasets for advancing the argument, while textual interpretation is used to examine their linguistic and ideological functions. Three notable findings are made. Firstly, renaming is shown to interweave lived encounters into sacred and meaningful space, and in so doing, convert experience into spatial identity. Secondly, the notable toponymic practices transform moments of struggle and contestation into historical memory interwoven within geography. Thirdly, renaming practices preserve negotiated power within space, proving that place names are records of recognition, agreement, and power relations.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article is intradisciplinary as it blends biblical discourse and sociolinguistics with onomastics. It further interacts with South African decolonial discourse on place-name transformation and epistemic justice. It refuses disciplinary silos that treat biblical discourse, sociolinguistics, and socio-political meaning as isolated and unrelated domains of scientific inquiry.

Keywords: Beersheba; decolonial reading; Genesis; Peniel; place-name transformation; toponymic practice.

Introduction

Right from the outset, the concept of toponymic practices refers to the social, political, linguistic, and cultural processes through which place names (toponyms) are created, assigned, changed, maintained, or contested (Mathebula 2026:5–8; Ndletyana 2012:88–89). Within onomastics (the scientific study of names) and critical toponymy (a subfield of human geography), toponymic practices encompass the naming, renaming, preservation, erasure, translation, and linguistic adaptation of geographical entities such as cities, streets, airports, rivers, and regions.[1] These practices are not neutral or innocent but are semiotic and ideological practices upon which language inscribes power, historical memory, consciousness, and identity onto geographic landscapes. It is not surprising, then, for Ndletyana (2012:89) to suggest that 'Naming … is not a neutral exercise. It is mediated by power relations, depending on the political order'. What makes toponymic practices particularly compelling and arresting is that they unmask how seemingly ordinary practices of naming are profoundly structured semiotic interventions.

With this clarification of toponymic practices, a central bone of contention in their scrutiny within a decolonial context such as South Africa resides in the contested chemistry between *linguistic transformation* and *material change* (Duminy 2014:313), particularly whether the renaming of places constitutes substantive decolonisation or is largely decorative. This bone of contention is significant in view of the reality that it exposes uncertainty at the heart of decolonial discourse, namely whether the symbolic recovery of land through renaming meaningfully contributes to social justice in the absence of corresponding material or tangible transformation.[2] This uncertainty,

1.Contemporary South Africa has witnessed numerous place-name transformations intended to restore indigenous histories, memories, consciousness, and identities within the public landscape. Examples include changing from Jan Smuts Airport to O.R. Tambo International Airport, Pietersburg becoming Polokwane, and Louis Trichardt being renamed Makhado. All these reflect efforts to recalibrate historical memory through language and renaming.

2.This is about whether changing place names really helps fix unfairness in society or whether it is just a symbolic change that does not improve people's real lives. It asks if renaming places is enough on its own, or if real change also needs changes such as better housing, education, jobs, and fair access to resources.

as Duminy (2014) and Basik (2023) suggest, renders place-name changes either weapons of legitimate decolonisation or simply performative gestures of political symbolism. Accordingly, it is obvious that while renaming is defended as a corrective gesture that recovers sidelined indigenous voices and disrupts colonial epistemologies interlocked in geographic language, a counter-position is that these linguistic shifts may have a constrained impact if they are not accompanied by structural redistribution in land, economy, power, and governance, among others.

Cognisant of this historical trajectory, I think it would be regrettable if, *and only if*, contemporary South Africa pursues place-name transformation for any reason other than the restoration of historical justice, the affirmation of indigenous epistemologies and communities, and the recovery of memories displaced by colonial and apartheid arrogance. One would recall that following the advent of the so-called democracy in 1994, South Africa pursued an extensive programme of geographical renaming as part of its overarching project of nation-building, reconciliation, and decolonisation (Mathebula 2026). This process sought to replace many colonial and apartheid-era place names with names that recognise indigenous languages, histories, and the contributions of previously subjugated communities.

It is on this basis that I argue that to rename without confronting the historical asymmetries cemented in the land is to convert an emancipatory project into a superficial or hollow exercise of administrative substitution. The moral and political force of renaming, as Ndlovu (2023:325) proffers, resides precisely in its ability to challenge inherited regimes of recognition and to reposition previously subjugated histories within the centre of public consciousness and memory. South Africa must therefore remain vigilant against any tendency to treat place-name transformation as a matter of convenience or political expediency, for the question at stake is ultimately whose humanity, historical memory, and historical presence are deemed worthy of enduring visibility in the nation's geography.

Closely linked to this subject is the question of authority, namely who possesses the legitimacy to name or rename geographical spaces, as biblical precedents attribute such authority to divine or male-oriented figures (Richardson 1969; Tebes 2017), whereas contemporary South African practice situates it within democratic institutions, (de) colonialism, and public consultation processes (Ndlovu 2026:2; Williamson 2023:5). The question of authority generates tensions between symbolic restitution and perceived state-driven imposition. This problem is further complicated by concerns over historical memory and consciousness, as renaming may be interpreted as a necessary correction of colonial distortion or as a potential disruption of multilayered historical archives interwoven in existing toponyms (Rose-Redwood & Alderman 2011). What should not be confusing here is that the debate is not simply about whether renaming is permissible. It is about how authority, historical memory, and legitimacy are distributed in the face of naming itself.

Having said this, I must caution that these debates are inherently multifaceted and require careful consideration of the *symbolic* and *material* dimensions of renaming practices, as well as sensitivity to the historical and socio-political contexts in circumstances in which these transformations occur. To simply reduce these debates to symbolic correction or material transformation would be an oversimplification that obscures the multilayered, contested, and context-dependent nature of toponymic practices and their overarching socio-political implications.

On equal footing, the promotion of indigenous place names (Durban to eThekwini, Port Elizabeth to eGqeberha, Nelspruit to Mbombela, East London to kuGompo, and many others) raises questions about linguistic justice and visibility, but at the same time introduces practical and ideological challenges related to linguistic fragmentation or the privileging of certain languages over others in multilingual contexts (Cacciafoco & Cavallaro 2023). At an intellectual level, there is an underlying philosophical problem in drawing parallels or connections between biblical and contemporary renaming systems, making any direct transposition of biblical systems into contemporary contexts both scholarly productive and imperative.

Bearing this background in mind, I think that a decolonial reading of the selected biblical toponymic practices (Gn 28:19, Gn 32:30 and Gn 21:31) is a productive comparative discourse for contemporary South Africa and the wider African soil. This view is because it demonstrates how renaming in the biblical text is not a linguistic substitution but an intentional reconfiguration of spatial identity within which names are markers of transformed meaning, covenantal belonging, and renewed social orientation. In a similar conceptual register, these biblical texts may be read as early examples of how place names are used to renegotiate power over space and to engrave new cultural and symbolic orders onto geography, and in the process, provide interpretive resources for understanding South Africa's own toponymic transformation processes.

The relevance of this discourse resides in the reality that biblical renaming practices, while interwoven in theological philosophies, nonetheless advance the principle that language, along with onomastics, constructs geographic reality, a principle that resonates strongly with postcolonial and post-apartheid efforts to restore indigenous linguistic visibility in the public landscape. To overlook this intradisciplinary discourse would be an intellectual miscalculation, as it would obscure how cemented linguistic acts of renaming are in influencing collective memory and historical consciousness, legitimacy, and belonging across ancient and contemporary contexts. This background sets the scene for the section that follows, which establishes the research aim, questions, and potential contribution.

Framing the discourse: Research aim, questions, and potential contribution

The principal aim of this article is to perform a decolonial reading of three selected biblical toponymic practices in Genesis, specifically Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31. The intention is to probe how renaming is a linguistic weapon for constructing spatial identity, legitimising authority, and encoding collective memory and historical consciousness. This aim assesses how these biblical trends may illuminate, complicate, or contribute to contemporary debates on place-name transformation in South Africa, and perhaps elsewhere in the global village.[3] Of note, what cannot be simplistically accepted is the assumption that toponymic practices are neutral or value-free linguistic labels or benign narrative details, when in fact they are potent weapons through which authority, memory, historical consciousness, and spatial identity are produced and contested. Equally untenable is the reduction of biblical (re)naming episodes to ancient curiosities, as they reveal consistent, significant logics that resonate within contemporary struggles over place, land, legitimacy, and decolonial transformation.

With the principal aim explained just above, this article asks two interrelated research questions. Firstly, how do Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31 linguistically construct processes of renaming and spatial meaning-making within their narrative contexts? Secondly, in what ways can the trends and ideological functions of these biblical toponymic practices illuminate, complicate, or contribute to remodelling contemporary debates on place-name transformation and decolonisation in South Africa?

These two research questions are not asked for the mere sake of textual exposition. They are oriented towards a critical interrogation of how language is a site of power, memory, historical consciousness, and spatial reconfiguration. This is especially evident in ways that unearth the ideological stakes of naming and renaming practices within certain biblical narratives and contemporary South African decolonial discourse. Of note, the selection of the three biblical texts is intentional because they offer some of the Hebrew Bible's clearest accounts of place-name transformation.

Contribution-wise, this article integrates biblical toponymy within the overarching field of onomastics and sociolinguistics. The article treats Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31 as a coherent dataset and advances a methodologically meticulous technique to biblical language that anchors lexical and semantic patterns of spatial inscription.[4] In so doing, it bridges biblical discourse and contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship to show how place names are discursive sites where authority, memory, historical consciousness, and identity are negotiated. A further contribution resides in its decolonial reading, which extends the interpretive value of biblical toponymic practices far beyond antiquity or the past to interrogate contemporary South African debates on place-name transformation. In any event, it is necessary to present an exegesis of these biblical texts, hence the next section.

An exegesis of Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31

Genesis 28:19 - Bethel

Genesis 28:19 narrates Jacob's renaming of Luz as Bethel following his visionary encounter, an act that Steinmann (2019) and Aguboshim (2021) interpret as a paradigmatic instance of sacralised toponymy.[5] This is where spatial identity is linguistically reconstituted through divine encounter. According to Walton (2010), in the Ancient Near Eastern context, naming does more than describe. In other words, it creates meaning by influencing reality itself. Through this process, biblical significance is inscribed onto geography, which turns ordinary locations into sacred grounds. By the same logic, Alter (2019) observes that the narrative's repetition of naming underscores an intentional or deliberate literary strategy in which linguistic acts stabilise memory and authorise new socio-religious realities. It is for this reason that De Vinne (2006) submits that this renaming practice may be considered an epistemic re-inscription of space upon which prior spatial identity (Luz) is displaced by a new theological-semantic order (Bethel). This proves how language is an instrument of ideological transformation in narrative form, and otherwise. This passage thus illustrates how toponymy is a historical memory mechanism and a legitimising discourse that binds divine encounter to spatial designation.

Genesis 32:30 - Peniel

In Genesis 32:30, Jacob names the place Peniel after declaring that he has seen God 'face to face' and survived, a linguistic act that embeds *experiential theology* directly into *geographical designation*. Westermann (1985) and Arnold (2020) argue that this episode is a typical etiological naming structure in Genesis, in which place names are retrospectively explained through narrated encounters that confer meaning upon otherwise ordinary locations. Even more so, Wenham (1994) underscores that the naming of Peniel is a theological marker of liminality, which situates Jacob at the intersection of human vulnerability and divine encounter. The act of naming here is not incidental but performative (Arnold 2020), as it

3.One ought to be mindful that the present article solely uses the New International Version, published in 2011, precisely because it represents a contemporary English translation that balances formal and dynamic equivalence. This biblical version is linguistically accessible yet semantically stable in rendering biblical toponymic references befitting textual interpretation.

4.For purposes of clarity, lexical patterns of spatial inscription are the different words people use to name places, such as towns, rivers, or streets. Semantic patterns of spatial inscription are the meanings and ideas those names carry, such as history, culture, or important stories about the place. This distinction is important as it elucidates the difference between the linguistic forms used to designate space and the symbolic meanings through which space acquires cultural, historical, and political significance.

5.This point means that after Jacob had a special encounter with God, he changed the name of the place from Luz to Bethel to show that it had become a sacred place. This is a classic example of giving a place a new name because of its religious significance, which makes the name itself represent a new spiritual identity.

converts a moment of existential transformation into a permanent spatial signifier (Wenham 1994). Against these assertions, Peniel illustrates how language stabilises subjective religious experience into collective spatial memory, showing the power of naming to construct enduring epistemic and affective geographies.

Genesis 21:31 - Beersheba

Genesis 21:31 presents the naming of Beersheba as a settlement arising from an oath between Abraham and Abimelech, a toponymic act that is anchored in legal and covenantal discourse rather than exclusively theological encounter. Speiser (1964) observes that Beersheba likely derives from wordplay involving 'oath' and 'seven', which indicates that ancient Hebrew toponymy frequently enciphers juridical and symbolic meanings within spatial terminology. Krasovec (2010) further draws attention to the fact that this passage represents the patriarchal or male-oriented tradition in which naming is tied to negotiated social order and territorial recognition. Unlike purely theophanic renamings,[6] this instance underscores interhuman agreement as the basis for spatial designation (Baden 2012), and in so doing, underlines the juridical dimension of biblical toponymy. Under these circumstances, Beersheba demonstrates how place names are archival records of social contracts, entangling power relations, negotiated authority, and collective memory into the landscape. In view of these scholarly perspectives on the three selected biblical texts, this article adopts an interdisciplinary orientation; however, the realisation of its interpretive aims remains contingent upon clearly articulated theoretical and methodological considerations, which are subsequently outlined in the next section.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

This section serves a dual purpose. It begins by outlining the selected theoretical concept that guides the interpretation and discussion of the selected biblical texts, namely decolonial reading, before proceeding to explain the sampling procedure through which the biblical texts were selected and the interpretive technique employed for their discussion. These two subsections are detailed next.

Decolonial reading

A decolonial reading is an interpretive technique nested in decolonial theory that critically interrogates texts (both spoken and written) in order to uncover how the colonial logics of power, knowledge production, and representation influence meaning, even within historical or religious narratives (Figueroa 2015). This theoretical concept questions epistemic justice by challenging dominant interpretive ideologies, recovering side-lined voices, and exposing the ways in which language, discourse, and cultural systems interpolate hierarchies of authority, identity, and space (Sakupapa 2023). Put differently, a decolonial reading means looking at a story or text carefully to see how powerful groups may have influenced the way people think and understand the world. It also helps one listen to voices that were ignored and understand different people's experiences and ideas. In support of this theory's understanding, Daifallah (2019:811) avers that decolonial thinkers often invoke pre-colonial traditions in their efforts to fashion 'national cultures' – modes of being, understanding, and self-expression specific to a de-colonising collectivity's experience.

In sharing the same sentiments, Egya (2024:9–10) posits that rather than using traditional Western literary ideologies, decolonial reading centres indigenous, local, and historically subjugated perspectives, languages, and realities to uncover shrouded structures of colonial power. On equal footing, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) and Diko (2024) are of the general view that decolonial reading acknowledges that although physical colonial rule has largely ended, the hierarchies of race, class, and knowledge it created still control society. And for this reason, I submit that decolonial readers ought to make attempts to search for texts or subtexts that solidify or challenge this matrix.

In addition to this theoretical definition, I must underline that a decolonial reading is *not* a neutral or purely descriptive exercise in textual interpretation, nor is it an attempt to reproduce dominant scholarly viewpoints without interrogating their epistemic foundations. It is *not* reducible to thematic interpretation, literary appreciation, or historical reconstruction that leaves underlying structures of power, knowledge, and representation unexamined. Nor does it treat texts as ideologically transparent or culturally universal, as these assumptions tend to conceal the colonial logics cemented in language and interpretation. Importantly, decolonial reading is *not* a technique that separates meaning from power but one that consistently exposes how meaning itself is produced through historically situated regimes of power and exclusion. In fact, Mendoza (2021) is clear about this position, suggesting that within an African intellectual context, decolonial reading entails a deliberate epistemic shift that recentres indigenous knowledge systems, lived experiences, and linguistic worlds as legitimate platforms of interpretation, and not peripheral or supplementary sources of meaning.

Its (decolonial reading) application in this article is justified by the demand to critically examine how biblical toponymic practices construct and legitimise spatial meaning through the processes of renaming and how these processes may resonate with or problematise contemporary South African debates on decolonisation and place-name transformation. This theoretical concept, as proven in the interpretation and discussion section, moves far beyond a descriptive interpretation of biblical texts towards a critical interrogation of their ideological and linguistic underpinnings, particularly in relation to authority, memory, historical consciousness, and belonging. It is therefore theoretically befitting precisely because it presents the interpretative standpoint necessary to

6.These are acts of changing or giving a place or person a new name in response to a direct appearance or revelation of God.

connect ancient narrative practices of spatial inscription with present-day struggles over linguistic justice and the symbolic reconfiguration of public space.

Data selection and interpretive technique

Purposive sampling is employed in this article as a non-probability sampling strategy. It intentionally or deliberately selects biblical texts according to their direct relevance to the research aim and questions, as well as their capacity to yield convincing and conceptually significant data (Ahmad & Wilkins 2025; Obilor 2023). Within this context, three biblical passages are purposively selected as the dataset, namely Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31, as a result of their explicit interaction with toponymic practices involving the renaming of geographical spaces within narrative contexts. This selection is methodologically significant in connection with contemporary South Africa, where ongoing debates on place-name transformation interrogate linguistic justice, historical memory and consciousness, and the decolonial influence of spatial identity. It must be accepted that although other biblical passages also trigger naming and place-name traditions, they are not included herein because they would largely reproduce arguments already represented by the selected corpus. Given the purpose and space limitations of the article, the interpretation and discussion are intentionally confined to these three texts to avoid repetition while guaranteeing sufficient textual coverage.

In terms of interpretive technique, the current article utilises textual analysis, which refers to a systematic interpretive move for examining written material in order to identify patterns of meaning, linguistic structures, and discursive features reflected within the text (Bernard & Ryan 1998; Ifversen 2003; Thomas & Giftsy 2026). This technique is justified on the basis that the article interrogates how language operates within biblical texts to construct spatial identity, authority, historical consciousness, and memory. This article does not measure any frequency or produce statistical generalisations. Textual analysis is therefore befitting given that it opens a platform for close reading of lexical choices and narrative framing, exploring how toponymic practices are ideological and symbolic mechanisms within the selected biblical corpus. Now that the theoretical and methodological considerations have been explained, the next section concentrates on the interpretation and discussion.

Interpretation and discussion

The debate on renaming in South Africa remains sensitive, as it is entangled with questions of historical justice, identity, and the lingering material and symbolic legacies of colonialism and apartheid. It tends to provoke contestation because it is not just administrative but touches directly on collective memory and competing claims over whose histories are legitimised in public space. It was then necessary to handle this phenomenon with interpretive precision and historical sensitivity, given that renaming is inseparable from wider struggles over historical memory, identity, and the redistribution of symbolic power.

Genesis 28:19 - He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz

This biblical text presents a decisive moment in which a spatial name is reconfigured through an encounter that fuses experience, memory, and authority into a single linguistic act. The text records the transition from Luz to Bethel, a shift that, within a decolonial consideration, exposes naming as an epistemic operation and not an innocent label. The lexical replacement signals a rupture in spatial consciousness, in which an inherited designation is displaced by a meaning anchored in revelation and reorientation. The context is that Jacob, fleeing from Esau, stopped at a certain place to rest and experienced a vivid dream of a ladder reaching heaven, accompanied by a spiritual promise of land, protection, and future blessing (Gn 28:10–15). Upon awakening, he recognised the sacred significance of the site, declared it 'the house of God', and formally renamed the place Bethel, thus transforming its identity from Luz into a theologically charged spatial marker (Gn 28:16–19). What occurred is therefore a linguistic and symbolic re-inscription of space, in which a regular geographic location is reinterpreted through divine encounter and permanently encoded with new meaning through renaming.

Scholars of biblical onomastics, such as Wenham (1994) and Walton (2010), aver that ancient naming practices mirror worldview structures by imbuing ideology into geography itself. This implies that 'Luz' is not erased unwittingly or unintentionally. It is overwritten through a deliberate semiotic act that reorganises how space is known and remembered. A practical analogy appears in postcolonial and post-apartheid urban renaming processes, such as the shift from colonial names to indigenous ones in South Africa, in which linguistic substitution seeks to recalibrate collective memory and consciousness. These practical examples include DF Malan Drive in Durban, in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, which became Mangosuthu Highway, and Verwoerd Street in Bloemfontein, in the Free State province, which was renamed Charlotte Maxeke Street. But still, the tension remains sharp. When language transforms space, does it liberate cognition, or simply relocate authority into a new tokenistic register? This biblical text forces a confrontation with the unsettling reality that naming is never innocent, and Bethel stands as a linguistic interruption that destabilises any illusion of neutral geography.

For those who may refuse to join the dialogue or remain unconvinced, the question is no longer whether place names should change, because history suggests that they always have. The real question is whether contemporary South Africa will allow its spatial vocabulary to continue privileging inherited colonial and apartheid epistemologies, or whether it will bravely embrace names that more faithfully reflect the histories, languages, and lived experiences of the majority. To remain indifferent is itself a political position, for every

retained or transformed toponym silently affirms a particular philosophy of historical memory and consciousness. After all, every map tells a story, and every place name answers the question of whose past deserves to influence the future.

A decolonial reading sharpens this observation by exposing how Bethel is a site where epistemic authority is reinscribed through narrative language. The declaration 'this is the house of God', as earlier stated, converts geography into ideology, binding spatial identity to a particular theological philosophy that governs interpretation and memory. Mignolo's (2009:163–164) explanation of epistemic disobedience becomes useful here, as it reveals how competing systems of meaning are organised through control of toponymic practices. In this case, Bethel is an epistemic consolidation point where experience is translated into a durable linguistic structure that influences future interpretation of the land. This simply implies that a decolonial reading suggests that when Jacob names the place Bethel, the story is doing more than describing land. It is giving power to a new way of understanding and remembering that place through language. It means that calling it 'the house of God' changes how people think about the land and teaches them to see it through a particular belief system that shapes future meaning.

In addition to this observation, a contemporary parallel may be drawn with contemporary South African debates on city, street, airport, and building renaming, among others, in which the replacement of colonial names is justified as epistemic correction (Guyot & Seethal 2007), but simultaneously raises questions about whose knowledge system becomes dominant and influential. The interpretive difficulty is unavoidable precisely because every act of renaming weakens one order while constructing another, which leaves no neutral ground from which legitimacy may be assessed without ideological residue. Under these circumstances, I must categorically state that I argue against the advancement of one naming order over another, as such privileging potentially reproduces tokenistic domination under a different guise of exclusion while undermining the possibility of legitimately inclusive historical recognition. Hence, this practice amounts to a form of toponymic reductionism, insofar as it flattens the complexity of multilayered historical memory into a single, monopolistic regime of geographic interpretation.

Genesis 28:19 compels recognition that spatial language is a battleground of epistemologies, and Bethel is a coded pronouncement of who has the power to define reality itself. For contemporary South Africa, this points to an urgent requirement that renaming processes be located within an inclusive deliberation and substantive material transformation, which guarantees that linguistic change does not reconstitute hierarchies of exclusion under the rhetoric of correction. It further points out that meaningful decolonial revitalisation relies on sustained critical vigilance regarding the ways in which language structures public consciousness, so that naming is treated as a collective task in epistemic responsibility as opposed to a unilateral assertion of authority.

Over and above this argument, the implication of Genesis 28:19 resides in its capacity to reveal how memory and historical consciousness are stabilised through linguistic intervention, transforming fleeting experience into institutionalised spatial permanence. This biblical experience does not simply report an event but fossilises interpretation into geography, guaranteeing that future readers inherit a structured way of seeing the land. Westermann's (1985:14–15) view of etiological naming confirms this dynamic, showing that the text retroactively organises meaning to legitimise present identity structures. In contemporary South Africa, this insight is imperative on account of the reality that place-naming processes similarly influence collective memory and history by blending particular histories and identities into the physical and symbolic soil. It is a powerful cultural intervention that determines how future generations will understand belonging, history, memory, and legitimacy in the land.

In practical terms, this dynamic is reflected in the dual consciousness of renamed (South) African landscapes, where colonial toponyms continue to circulate in informal usage while official discourse advances indigenous designations as authoritative alternatives. This unremitting tension exposes a fracture in linguistic power that no administrative decree fully resolves, as it is established in conflicts over memory, legitimacy, and historical inscription. From a decolonial standpoint, I posit that this fracture is an ongoing struggle rather than confusion, as it reveals competing regimes of remembrance seeking spatial permanence through language or renaming practices. The intellectual force of this passage resides precisely in its insistence that land is never occupied but continuously re-authored through discursive practice that determines what is remembered and what is rendered silent. Bethel, in this sense, is an epistemic construction modelled by linguistic essentialism and memorial nationalism, where language does not describe reality but governs the conditions of its intelligibility and endurance.

On equal footing, I submit that contemporary South Africa has little reason to feel apologetic about the transformation of place names, because renaming is cemented in historical processes upon which communities have always reconfigured space to mirror evolving identities, values, and collective desires. The renaming of Luz to Bethel demonstrates that the re-inscription of geography through language is neither an aberration nor a modern political invention. It is a longstanding human practice where societies anchor new meanings, memories, histories, and futures onto the soil. While such transformations inevitably generate contestation, this should not be mistaken for failure, as disputes generally signal the emergence of an inclusive dialogue about whose histories have been remembered and whose have been relegated to silence.

A decolonial reading therefore implies that the real danger resides not in renaming itself but in preserving inherited spatial vocabularies that normalise historical exclusions as though they were natural or beyond scrutiny. South Africa's challenge is consequently not whether place names should change but how such changes contribute meaningfully to a future-oriented public memory that honours historical complexity while restoring the linguistic visibility of communities long oppressed within the national scenery. Indeed, renaming is intellectual courage and democratic imagination, through which a society consciously chooses the stories it wishes to carry forward into the future.

Genesis 32:30 - So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared'

Genesis 32:30 records Jacob's renaming of the place Peniel following a dramatic encounter in which he wrestles through the night and emerges physically wounded yet existentially transformed (Gn 32:24–29). The renaming event captures a linguistic process through which personal experience is translated into spatial permanence. Jacob's declaration, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared', converts a fleeting encounter into a durable geographical marker that carries memory and history far beyond the confines of individual consciousness. I also think it may be cautiously suggested that this narrative proves how language is a repository of memory and history, allowing significant experiences to be recorded in the land and preserved for subsequent generations to reflect on and interpret. Ross (1985) is clear about the centrality of renaming as a sociolinguistic movement nested in power and memory structures, implying that place names are enduring vehicles through which collective experience is encoded, stabilised, and transmitted across generations.

A decolonial consideration immediately draws attention to the epistemic significance of this practice. The place receives its identity from lived experiences and encounters. As Wenham (1994:161) puts it, knowledge emerges from participation, struggle, fragility, and survival. This view stands in sharp contrast to South Africa's colonial and apartheid traditions of naming, which have frequently detached places from local memory and imposed external meanings upon them (Ntloedibe & Mtombeni 2025:233–235). Peniel, accordingly, is a radically different logic of spatial inscription, one in which the authority to rename is represented in experience and relationality. This passage leaves little room for the assumption that geography exists independently of human meaning-making, because it underscores that space acquires *significance* through the narratives that communities choose to preserve and transmit. This thought brings me to a different point, that, if geography truly possesses meaning independent of human experience, why have communities across history struggled so intensely over the right to name and rename the very landscapes? The answer resides in the reality that space acquires its enduring significance through lived experience, collective memory, and the narratives that communities choose to preserve across generations.

I must also put forward that a necessary clarification is that the text does not imply colonial or apartheid naming practices were entirely devoid of local meaning, but rather that they continually privileged external or imposed interpretive ideologies over indigenous experiential and linguistic ones. The text also does not suggest that geography is purely socially constructed but instead draws attention to the fact that spatial meaning is always co-produced through the interaction of physical place and culturally situated practices of (re)naming, memory, history, and interpretation. After all, what endures in human landscapes is not only the terrain itself but the multilayered stories, contested memories, histories, and shifting languages upon which that terrain is made intelligible across generations. The question, perhaps, that should be a bone of contention is whether place names are primarily weapons of historical repair or mechanisms upon which new forms of symbolic authority are silently installed under the mask of transformation. But then again, every act of (re)naming carries memory, history, power, and story, shaping not only how space is seen but also how it is understood, believed, remembered, and bequeathed – that is, to frame, to claim, to name.

The interpretive force of the text becomes even more apparent when scrutinised through the standpoint of power and memory. Here, Jacob does not name Peniel from a position of conquest, territorial expansion, or political domination. He names it from a position of encounter and transformation. This distinction is important because of the reality that it collapses a common historical trend whereby naming practices have accompanied acts of dispossession and power. To the same extent, a decolonial consideration insists that this difference matters (Daifallah 2019). Peniel emerges from a struggle that transforms the subject before it transforms the landscape. The sequence is revealing in that internal transformation precedes external inscription. The unsettling question is whether any society can truly transform its scenery without first transforming its historical consciousness. The answer lies in Peniel, where the power to rename is earned through ethical transformation before it is exercised through linguistic proclamation.

Against this backdrop, I further submit that contemporary South Africa offers a useful parallel. Debates concerning the renaming of cities, streets, airports, and public institutions, among others, tend to focus on administrative power and political legitimacy (Moshoadiba 2026; Ndletyana 2012), yet Genesis 32:30 redirects attention towards the question of whose experiences and memories are being recognised within public space. If landscapes are repositories of collective memory and past experiences, then the continued subjugation of indigenous names in South Africa raises uncomfortable questions about whose histories are considered worthy of permanence, as earlier underlined. Certainly, there are meaningful efforts underway to restore

indigenous toponymic presence in today's South Africa, exemplified previously (also see Mathebula 2026). Nonetheless, these initiatives continue to unfold within uneven historical and institutional conditions in which colonial naming legacies remain cemented in everyday speech, administrative systems, and public memory, thus slowing the full symbolic and cognitive recalibration of the land. Peniel, against this fact, exposes a fundamental truth that every map carries a philosophy of recognition, and every place name reveals whose realities have been granted the privilege of endurance.

In view of these submissions, the lesson for contemporary South Africa is that renaming must be pursued as a sustained epistemic and cultural project, given that the endurance of place names ultimately influences how history is remembered, validated, and transmitted. Genesis 32:30, read through against this context, suggests that spatial transformation is meaningful only when it succeeds in interweaving lived experience into collective consciousness in ways that are publicly legible and institutionally solidified. This phenomenon ensures that restored names do not remain symbolic overlays on unchanged cognitive lands, demanding a concerted strategy, as Ndletyana (2012) and Ntshangase (2025) put it, in which education systems, mainstream media discourse, civic participation, and official cartography work in concert to recalibrate inherited land imaginaries. Otherwise, linguistic change may remain formally visible but socially fragile. It is my view, then, that an unavoidable irony emerges. If every map already reflects a philosophy of recognition, then whose philosophy continues to silently govern the maps still guiding daily navigation, and why does the answer continuously remain easiest to see in what people instinctively still call a place rather than what policy purports it to be?

What also needs to be accepted is the fact that the text shows that naming is epistemic preservation through which experience becomes institutional memory, which is against the fact that Jacob could have remembered the encounter privately. But instead, he externalises it into geography, ensuring that future generations inherit a landscape already saturated with interpretation. Bucur (2024), Torcoș (2025), and Westermann (1985) correctly observe that such naming traditions are etiological, providing explanations that organise collective understanding of place. Furthermore, a decolonial reading presses further by recognising that these explanations are also interventions into memory itself. They determine which experiences become visible and which recede into obscurity. This simply means that Jacob could have kept his experience to himself, but by naming the place Peniel, he made sure that other people would remember the story for many years. This shows that place names have the potential to help humanity remember some histories and experiences, while other stories may be forgotten if they are never connected to the places around them.

The relevance of this observation to contemporary South Africa is difficult to overstate. The restoration of indigenous place names is frequently criticised as symbolic, as earlier stated, yet such criticism overlooks a fundamental historical truth: Colonialism and apartheid themselves relied extensively on symbols, language, and naming to 'normalise' dispossession and institutionalise unequal systems of recognition. For this reason, I argue that it is intellectually inconsistent to minimise symbolic restoration while accepting the uncritical symbolic architecture of oppression that continues to shape public space. Every nation lives within narratives sedimented into language, and every landscape is an archive of intentionally selected memories. Genesis 32:30 consequently demonstrates that naming constitutes a delicate technology of historical consciousness through which communities defend their identities long after the originating experience has passed from living memory. To reject this process as inconsequential is to misunderstand the very mechanism by which oppressive regimes secured their permanence, and equally the means by which historically oppressed communities intend to recover their rightful place within the geography of historical memory.

Genesis 21:31 - So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there

Genesis 21:31 presents the naming of Beersheba as the culmination of a dispute over a well between Abraham and Abimelech, followed by a covenantal agreement that sought to establish mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence. This point is confirmed in various biblical texts:

- Genesis 21:25: 'Then Abraham complained to Abimelek about a well of water that Abimelek's servants had seized'.
- Genesis 21:27: 'So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelek, and the two men made a treaty'.
- Genesis 21:28–30: 'Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs from the flock … These seven ewe lambs you will accept from my hand as a witness that I dug this well'.
- Genesis 26:28–29: 'We saw clearly that the Lord was with you; so we said, 'There ought to be a sworn agreement between us'.
- Genesis 26:31: 'Early the next morning the men swore an oath to each other'.

Within this biblical context, the place derives its name from an oath and the presentation of seven ewe lambs (Gn 21:22–31), interweaving negotiation, testimony, and legitimacy into the landscape. From a decolonial viewpoint, this episode immediately challenges any assumption that place names emerge arbitrarily or innocently. It is my view that the toponym Beersheba is a linguistic document that conserves the memory of a political agreement and a contested claim to resources. The significance of this observation should not be underestimated. The text underscores that naming is implicated in questions of ownership, recognition, and power. On closer reflection, a place name becomes a weapon through which a particular

version of history is stabilised and transmitted (Guyot & Seethal 2007:56). What should not be misunderstood is that Beersheba is not just a regular name for a place but an important agreement and promise between people that was remembered through the name.

Reading this text decolonially presses this observation further by drawing attention to the politics of recognition imprinted within the renaming event. Abraham does not simply occupy the well and proceed as though his claim is self-evident. He enters a process of negotiation through which his relationship to the space is publicly acknowledged. This detail is important because it represents consultation and relational legitimacy as central dimensions of geographical inscription. In view of this fact, I submit that contemporary South Africa finds itself confronted by a similar challenge. General debates surrounding the renaming of towns, streets, airports, and public institutions revolve around who possesses the power to define the symbolic landscape and whose historical experiences should be elevated within public memory.

The lesson of Beersheba is especially striking in this regard. It suggests that durable spatial identities emerge most convincingly when they are accompanied by processes of recognition, participation, and negotiated legitimacy. This does not imply that all stakeholders will agree, nor does it eliminate ideological contestation. It does, however, expose the weakness of approaches that seek to secure lasting legitimacy while overlooking meaningful interaction with those who inhabit the symbolic and material landscapes affected by transformation. The intellectual force of Beersheba is in its insistence that power over space acquires durability when it is publicly recognised and socially intelligible. It may therefore be untrue to assume that durable place-name transformation may be attained through administrative power alone.

The contemporary relevance of Genesis 21:31 is actually compelling when historical memory and indigenous restoration are judiciously considered. This is because today's South Africa grapples with inherited land vocabularies that give honour to colonial and apartheid histories while rendering indigenous experiences less visible within the national scenery. This is on the grounds that renaming initiatives are symbolic exercises that fail to address material disparities. While this concern deserves serious consideration, the logic of Beersheba warns against dismissing symbolic transformation as though historical memory and language occupy a secondary place in social life.

Human communities understand themselves through stories, and those stories are anchored in names that organise collective memory and historical consciousness. To disregard the symbolic and significant dimension of place names is to underestimate the influence that language exerts upon identity, belonging, and historical consciousness. And in fact, one may ask, how can a society hope to cultivate an inclusive future while navigating a scenery whose vocabulary affirms exclusions inherited from the past? Genesis 21:31 is, indeed, acceptable evidence that place names are repositories of social agreements, historical memory, and epistemic legitimacy, reminding contemporary South Africa that the struggle over names is ultimately a struggle over whose humanity, history, and knowledge are granted enduring visibility in the public imagination. The next section concentrates on this article's limitations and potential scholarly implications.

Limitations and potential scholarly implications

Insofar as this article's debates are noted, one limitation is that it focuses only on three selected passages from Genesis, which means its conclusions cannot automatically be generalised or universalised to all biblical naming practices or to every context of decolonial interpretation. It also relies primarily on textual analysis, as stated under its methodological component, so it does not include archaeological or anthropological datasets that could intensify or challenge some of its arguments. Despite these limitations, the article opens important potential scholarly directions, especially by encouraging comparative discourse between biblical toponymy and African indigenous naming systems, as well as more interdisciplinary work that combines linguistics, theology, history, and political geography. It submits that future research should move far beyond isolated textual readings towards universal studies of how language, power, and historical memory interact in ancient and contemporary contexts. With these limitations and future scholarly avenues in mind, the next section presents concluding remarks.

Conclusion

This article examined Genesis 28:19, Genesis 32:30, and Genesis 21:31 from a decolonial standpoint. It argued that biblical toponymic practices are never neutral or innocent but multifaceted linguistic interventions through which space is inscribed with historical memory, authority, and ideological meaning. It contended that Bethel, Peniel, and Beersheba each mirror distinct but interlaced processes of spatial transformation, in which encounter, struggle, and negotiation are translated into geographical identity. In doing so, the article submits that naming in these biblical texts is an instrument for stabilising experience into collective historical memory. It further establishes that these biblical trends offer a resonant interpretive model for contemporary debates on place-name transformation in South Africa, unmasking that these debates are ultimately struggles over recognition and historical permanence. The article concludes that language remains a decisive force in constructing spatial consciousness and that every task of naming carries the weight of epistemic choice that influences how reality itself is remembered and inherited. This leaves the reader to consider whose memories continue to be written into the landscapes they move through each day.

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