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The Geography of Sodom and Zoar: Reality Demolishes W. Schlegel's Attacks against a Northern Sodom

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Abstract:

My northern Sodom theory has been batted about the scholarly community since I first began to publish on the subject in 2002. In the fall of that year, I presented a paper to the Near East Archaeological Society wherein I provided a detailed refutation of the traditional southern Sodom hypothesis held by several scholars, including W. Schlegel. Since that time, I have continued to challenge southern Sodom advocates regarding the many serious cracks in the southern theory, encouraging them to come up with a substantive refutation of my theory, if they could muster one. Up to the present time no one has offered legitimate evidence to the contrary. In my opinion, the fatal weaknesses inherent in Schlegel's criticisms of my position reveal the untenable nature of the southern Sodom hypothesis.



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The Geography of Sodom and Zoar: Reality Demolishes W. Schlegel's Attacks against a Northern Sodom

By Steven Collins, Ph.D.¹

IMPORTANT NOTE: *The following is S. Collins' response to William Schlegel² who has repeatedly criticized his identification of Tall el-Hammam (in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, approximately 8.5 miles NE of the Dead Sea) as biblical Sodom. Mr. Schlegel has laid out his arguments in two venues: 1) the BiblePlaces blog (hosted by Todd Bolen) on the Internet (which also contains many comments posted by Collins); and 2) in a letter published in the "Queries and Comments" section of the Nov/Dec 2013 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, which Collins answers in the same issue. Schlegel's letter was in response to a question Collins answered in the Jul/Aug 2013 issue of BAR dealing with the location of Zoar. The question Collins answered was prompted by his article in the Mar/Apr 2013 issue of BAR titled "Where is Sodom: The Case for Tall el-Hammam." Schlegel's comments in both venues are included herein (after the Introduction), paragraph by paragraph (even sentence by sentence), in order to facilitate a systematic dissecting of his arguments. Schlegel's comments appear verbatim in Arial font. Following each of his paragraphs or sentences, Collins' response appears in Times New Roman font, with his footnotes also in TNR font.*

INTRODUCTION

The most recent controversy over the location of biblical Sodom and the Land of the Kikkar (Gen

19:28) has been in the 19th century³ has been stirred up directly in response to my research, explorations, and excavations pertaining to the subject since 2002. Since I presented my initial paper on Sodom's location to the Near East Archaeological Society (NEAS) over a decade ago, my investigations into the matter have grown exponentially. And interest in the subject has grown commensurately. At this point, a bit of history is in order.

Prior to the presentation of my NEAS paper on the location of Sodom in 2002 we had already made an exploratory trip to Jordan to check out each and every archaeological site in the Kikkar, NE of the Dead Sea. We examined all the relevant survey and excavation reports available at the Department of Antiquities (DoA) and ACOR (American Center of Oriental Research, Amman) in Jordan. I wrote up our findings in my NEAS paper, which later became a book on the subject.⁴ Over the next three years we continued our research and explorations, and worked with the DoA to develop a proposal to excavate the site that was, on the basis of our textual and archaeological analysis, the most likely candidate for Sodom—Tall el-Hammam.

In the late summer of 2005, the DoA accepted our lengthy proposal for the excavation of Tall el-Hammam, and the Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project (TeHEP) held its first dig season in the winter of 2005-2006. (Significantly, the proposal included over 40 pages of research into the location of Sodom.) Initially it was a commitment for seven excavation seasons. After two seasons we⁵ signed a five-year Joint Scientific Project Agreement with the DoA. Three years into that contract, a new 10-year Joint Agreement with the DoA was signed, projecting TeHEP through 2020. We are presently entering into our ninth season, and TeHEP has become one of the most important excavations in the southern Levant.

³ H.B. Tristram, *The Land of Moab: Travels and Discoveries on the East Side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan*, 2nd ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 1874) 330-333; W.M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book: Southern Palestine and Jerusalem* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882) 371-376.

⁴ S. Collins, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah* (Albuquerque: Trinity Southwest University Press, 2006).

⁵ S. Collins, under the auspices of the College of Archaeology and Biblical History, Trinity Southwest University.

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² William Schlegel is Associate Professor of Bible for the Master's College IBEX Program in the Holy Land.

The importance of Tall el-Hammam is due, in part, to the fact that it was, for most of the period between ca. 3600 BCE and ca. 1700 BCE, the largest city in the southern Levant. It was also one of the most powerful city-states in the southern Levant during its long, uninterrupted history prior to the destruction of the entire complex civilization under its control sometime between 1750 and 1650 BCE. After being virtually invisible to the "biblical" archaeology community until recently, Tall el-Hammam with its constellation of Bronze Age satellite towns and villages is finally getting the recognition it deserves, not only for its ascendant position in antiquity, but also for being the historical ground from which the biblical stories of the Cities of the Kikkar (CK) emerged.⁶

Today, after a decade of ASOR (American Schools of Oriental Research) and NEAS papers, journal and magazine articles, myriad scholarly interactions, and hundreds of lectures about Tall el-Hammam/Sodom at colleges, universities, seminaries, conferences, churches, synagogues, and wide-ranging organizations, the excavation of Tall el-Hammam presses on, and the evidence continues to mount in favor of its identification as Sodom. Our new book (co-authored with Dr. Latayne C. Scott), *Discovering the City of Sodom* (Howard Books/Simon & Schuster, 2013) chronicles our work through the 2012 season, and sets forth the textual, geographical, and archaeological case for Tall el-Hammam as Sodom.

The response to my article, "Where is Sodom: The Case for Tall el-Hammam," in the March/April 2013 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* has been overwhelmingly positive—that is, except for a handful of scholars who hold tenaciously to the traditional southern Sodom theory (SST). Regardless of the volume of evidence we have accumulated in favor of Tall el-Hammam and her satellites being the infamous Cities of the Kikkar, some simply refuse to deal with that evidence, predictably falling back on a handful of

⁶ S. Collins, K. Hamdan and G. Byers, "Tall el-Hammam: Preliminary Report on Four Seasons of Excavation (2006-2009)," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 53 (2009) 385-414; S. Collins and H. Aljarrah, "Tall el-Hammam Season Six, 2011: Excavation, Survey, Interpretations and Insights," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 55 (2011) 581-608; S. Collins, "Where is Sodom?: The Case for Tall el-Hammam," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39.2 (Mar/Apr 2013) 32-41.

hackneyed secondary and tertiary hypotheses in order to prop up a theory that, on all imaginable scientific grounds, should have been abandoned long ago.

The reason I have chosen to respond to Schlegel's objections to my identification of Tall el-Hammam as Sodom is a simple one. His arguments against my position are (by now) a classic example of refusing to recognize incontrovertible evidence, and attempting to deflect rigorous, rational argumentation by proffering wild, unsupportable speculations. I do submit, however, that Schlegel's arguments against the Hammam-Sodom connection are no better than those offered up by B.G. Wood, C.E. Billington, or E.H. Merrill, all of which I have soundly refuted elsewhere.⁷

As all other SST advocates have done—and continue to do—Schlegel attempts to argue against a northern Sodom (Hammam) from the biblical text, geography, and a smattering of geology; but in the process he demonstrates a tendency toward bad hermeneutics, bad logic, and bad science. Now, I am not saying that he does this all the time. (I find his *Satellite Bible Atlas* to be a fine piece of work overall!) However, on the subject of Sodom's location, he seems bent on "holding the fort" for his version of the SST at all costs! And in the process he has twisted the meaning of the biblical text to the breaking point on a number of issues. Neither has he done his homework on the geographical and geological issues. But such things are typical of those who—for reasons that escape me—are willing to sacrifice sound biblical interpretation and good science in favor of a traditional opinion about Sodom's location that has neither textual support nor commensurate evidence on the ground.

ANSWERING SCHLEGEL ON SODOM

Mr. Schlegel has challenged my view of Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom on several key points. In what follows I shall quote his objections in their entirety, then respond to each in their order of appear-

⁷ S. Collins, "A Response to Bryant G. Wood's Critique of Collins' Northern Sodom Theory," *Biblical Research Bulletin* VII.7 (2007); S. Collins, "Tall el-Hammam Is Sodom: Billington's Heshbon Identification Suffers from Fatal Flaws," *Biblical Research Bulletin* XII.1 (2012); S. Collins, "Tall el-Hammam is Still Sodom: Critical Data-Sets Cast Serious Doubt on E.H. Merrill's Chronological Analysis," *Biblical Research Bulletin* XIII.1 (2013).

ance.⁸ [Schlegel's material appears below in Arial font, preceded by ⚡:q without quotation marks. My response follows immediately in Times New Roman font, preceded by ⚡:ø]

S: There are archaeological and chronological problems with identifying Tall el-Hammam with Sodom.

C: Although Schlegel mentions archaeological and chronological problems with Hammam as Sodom, he does not identify what these are. He is certainly referring to articles contra my position written by a few scholars on the far literalist right of the hermeneutical spectrum. However, I have soundly refuted such objections in previous articles in answer to Wood, Billington, and Merrill, respectively.⁹ Since Schlegel does not tell the reader what these problems are, I strongly recommend a careful reading of my articles on the subject.

What I will say here is that there is, in reality, no archaeological problem with identifying Tall el-Hammam with Sodom none whatsoever. The only possible objection that one might proffer is the existence of an Iron Age 2 walled town built on Hammam's upper tall seven centuries after its Bronze Age destruction. But the argument is weak in the extreme. Some have said that this is a violation of a handful Old Testament passages stating that Sodom and Gomorrah became a wasteland forever. However, this same poetic *language of annihilation* is used routinely against Israel's enemies in the prophetic literature. But the fact of the matter is that the Bronze Age Cities of the Kikkar were utterly destroyed at the same time, and were never inhabited again. Building on a relatively small part of the ancient ruins of Sodom seven centuries later does not constitute the rebuilding of Sodom! (In this light, it is interesting to note the divine promise to rebuild Sodom along with Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16:53-55.)

⁸ From Mr. Schlegel's article "Biblical Problems with Locating Sodom at Tall el-Hammam," from the BiblePlaces Blog online at BiblePlaces.com.

⁹ These three articles (and more) are accessible online at BiblicalResearchBulletin.com, and TallElHammam.com under the "Related Publications" tab. See also S. Collins and L.C. Scott, *Discovering the City of Sodom* (New York: Howard Books/Simon & Schuster, 2013); and S. Collins, "Where is Sodom? BAR 32-41.

The principal objection to the Hammam/Sodom connection in some minds continues to be the chronology. Those like Schlegel who do biblical chronology using the methodology of Bishop Ussher place Abra(ha)m in a 22nd to 20th century BCE timeframe. The destruction date of Tall el-Hammam would place Abra(ha)m in a 19th to 17th century timeframe. Which is correct? I have demonstrated conclusively in another article¹⁰ that *all* ANE data-sets relevant to the issue converge to eliminate the possibility of the patriarchal narratives playing out prior to 1900 BCE, and that the destruction date of Tall el-Hammam is perfectly in line with the *actual* time of Abra(ha)m.

S: Here are some scriptural/textual considerations. A main reason that a northern location is sought for Sodom is the belief that Genesis 13:10-12 places Sodom in the region of the plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan, that is, north of the Dead Sea (Gen 13:10). However, I don't think Genesis 13:10-12 restricts Sodom to the Kikkar of the Jordan. Yes, Lot chose the Kikkar of the Jordan and travelled east from the Hill Country. However, Genesis 13:11-12 implies passage of time during which Lot moved around. That Lot pitched his tent as far as Sodom suggests a geographical separation from the Kikkar of the Jordan.

C: Schlegel is correct in saying that Genesis 13:10-12 is a central reason for placing Sodom in the Kikkar of the Jordan (*kikkar hayarden*). And the Kikkar is, in fact, the circular floodplain of the Jordan River north of the Dead Sea. So far, so good. But he does not believe that. I do hold to that position because it is an incontrovertible fact. Schlegel rejects it because he is stuck on a southern Sodom and is unwilling to deal with evidence to the contrary and *all* the evidence is to the contrary!

That he would even say, "I don't think Genesis 13:10-12 restricts Sodom to the Kikkar of the Jordan," is a clear demonstration that Schlegel has no earthly idea what he is talking about in this regard. (I will show this in detail momentarily.) Note his purposeful sleight-of-hand in ignoring the verses just prior to 10-12. He avoids verses 1-9 which emphasize and describe the Kikkar of the Jordan as *the focus* of Lot's interest, and that Lot was not merely in the Hill Coun-

¹⁰ S. Collins, *Tall el-Hammam... Critical Data-Sets*.

try+ but was specifically in the area of Bethel/Ai (WNW of Jericho!) when he saw ðthe entireö Kikkar. What was the writer's purpose in weaving such a detailed description of the Kikkar of the Jordan that was ðwell watered, like the garden of Yahweh, like the Land of Egyptö? For one purpose only: to emphasize how verdant the Land of the Kikkar was, and how wealthy and successful its cities had becomeö and this in contrast to what would happen to it when God's anger brought about its destruction by fire from the heavens!

Schlegel admits that Lot chose the Kikkar of the Jordan and travelled east+from Bethel/Ai to the Kikkar. But his next statement is hermeneutically bizarre, to say the least: % Genesis 13:11-12 implies passage of time during which Lot moved around.+With all due respect, such an interpretation is patently nonsensical. The words, the grammar, the syntax, the context imply nothing of the sort! What the passage *does* clearly say is that Lot liked what he saw of the Kikkar of the Jordan, and travelled eastward to get to it. He went to the place that caught his eye. What moving around? He saw, he liked, he went. Period. End of discussion. Why does Schlegel have a need to twist this passage in such a manner as this? Simpleö he is grasping at straws to maintain his southern Sodom view.

Schlegel's next statement is a hermeneutical nightmare: %That Lot pitched his tent as far as Sodomq suggests a geographical separation from the Kikkar of the Jordan. To propose from this passage that Sodom was somehow not on the Kikkar of the Jordan is so absurd that I can hardly imagine it. Such text-twisting is inaccurate, misleading, and unforgivable. But it gets worse!

S: Also, the word *kikkar* does not exclusively refer only to the area of the Rift Valley just north of the Dead Sea. %kikkar of the Jordan+can refer to the area as far north as Sukkoth (1 Kings 7:46). The word *kikkar* may be used to refer to other parts of the Rift Valley in general, especially when not accompanied by the appellation %of the Jordan+(Gen19:17,28; 2 Sam 18:23). In other words, Sodom could be in the Kikkar, without being in the Kikkar of the Jordan.

C: With these words Schlegel has tossed reasonable hermeneutics and geography to the wind. I have done exhaustive research and have written extensively on the Kikkar (*hakikkar*) and the Kikkar of the Jordan

(*kikkar hayarden*).¹¹ While many centuries laterö during Iron Age 2ö the Kikkar may have been stretched somewhat *northward*, it never included anything south of the mouth of the Jordan. But we are talking about Sodom and the Cities of the Kikkar in the book of *Genesis*. In *Genesis* the identity of *hakikkar* and *kikkar hayarden* is unmistakable. They are, unequivocally, one-and-the-same. The best way to demonstrate this is to examine *all* the uses of *hakikkar* and *kikkar hayarden* in *Genesis*. When this is done, Schlegel's take on the subject is revealed for what it is: a grotesque geographical error.

Following are the seven occurrences of *kikkar* in *Genesis*. Note that they all appear in the context of the Sodom tales.

13:1: ðLot looked up [from the Bethel/Ai area, about 20 miles NE of the Dead Sea] and saw that the whole *kikkar hayarden* was well-watered! ö

13:11: ðLot chose for himself the whole *kikkar hayarden* and set out [from Bethel/Ai] toward the east.ö

13:12: ðLot lived among the Cities of *hakikkar* and pitched his tents near Sodom.ö

19:17: [the Angels said to Lot] ðFlee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in *hakikkar*!ö

19:25: ðThus he [God] overthrew those cities and the entire *hakikkar*, including all those living in the cities, and also the vegetation in the land.ö

19:28: ðHe [Abra(ha)m] looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the Land of *hakikkar*, and saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.ö

19:29: ðSo when God destroyed the Cities of *hakikkar*! he brought Lot out of the catastrophe! ö

Thereö that is every use of *kikkar* in *Genesis*, and they all clearly refer to the selfsame place, where

¹¹ S. Collins, ðThe Geography of the Cities of the Plain,ö *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.1 (2002); S. Collins, ðReassessing the Term *hakikkar* in Nehemiah as Bearing on the Location of the Cities of the Plain,ö *Biblical Research Bulletin* VII.3 (2007).

Sodom and Gomorrah were located, north of the Dead Sea in the Kikkar of the Jordan. To suggest anything else is to mock the clear meaning of the text. How Schlegel can think otherwise is beyond me. I have taught biblical languages, hermeneutics, and geography for over 30 years, and this is a classic example of the same word being used the same way in the same context with the same meaning. I rest my case on this issue.

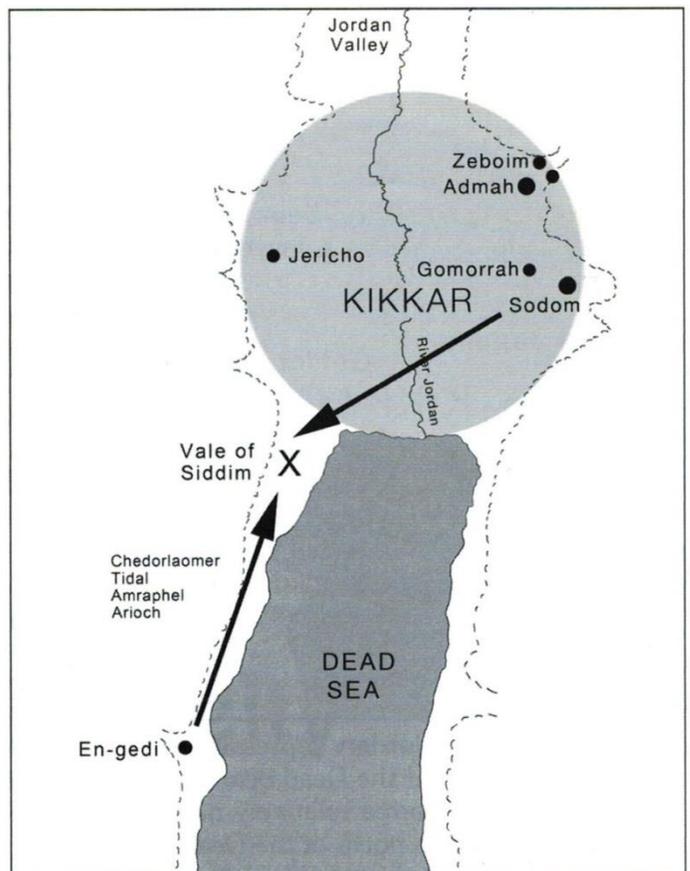
S: In favor of a southern location, Scripture associates Sodom geographically with the Valley of Siddim, which is the Salt Sea, an area distinct from the Kikkar of the Jordan (Gen 14:3,8,10). The meaning of Siddim, lime, whitewash+ (LXX salty+), and the pits in the region suggest a more southern location for Sodom.

C: Once again, sound hermeneutics has been dashed to the ground in the service of the SST. By no stretch of the imagination does Genesis 14 imply that Sodom and the Cities of the Kikkar (CK) were located in the Valley of Siddim. What it *does* say is that the CK army met Kedorlaomer's forces for battle against them in the Valley of Siddim. Kedorlaomer was on a northward march from Hazazon Tamar (= En Gedi; 2 Chron 20:2) along the widened beach created by low Dead Sea levels during MB2 (about as it is today). Obviously, the CK allies wanted to engage the much larger force of Kedorlaomer on a narrow stretch of beach before he broke onto the Kikkar (just S of Jericho).

Of course, when the lake level is low (as it was during MB2, the Roman/Byzantine Period, and today) sink holes by the thousands form, particularly around the NE quadrant of the Dead Sea many remaining invisible below the surface until an unsuspecting person walks or runs over them! The pits that the fleeing CK troops fell into were not of tar but of clay that is, the black, slimy mud around the Dead Sea shore it is simply the word *homer* (clay); tar being a misnomer created by the artificial Masoretic vowel pointing at least 20 centuries after the original writing of the passage. (Geologically, tar pits were never a feature of the Dead Sea area; although hard chunks of bitumen or asphalt do float to the surface from time to time, and the substance was mined from the Dead Sea muds in antiquity. Interestingly, we have unearthed evidence of the bitumen-processing trade at Tall el-Hammam.)

In reality, equating the Valley of Siddim with the Dead Sea in Genesis 14 is perfectly accurate for the simple reason that water levels historically fluctuate between -300 and -440 meters. This means that at times significant parts of the Valley of Siddim are actually under water, while at other times those same areas become wide beaches with dangerous sinkholes. These facts were first brought to my attention several years ago by L. Ritmeyer, who argues that the widened beach area created by low water levels as in the time of Abra(ha)m between Qumran and the Kikkar to the north is, itself, the Vale of Siddim where the armies of the CK met Kedorlaomer. I think his reasoning on this is unassailable; thus, I have to agree with him. Ritmeyer's take on the subject is worth including here, as the facts I mentioned above bear repeating:

Further support for the [northern] location of the Cities of the Plain can be gleaned from the battle that took place between the kings of these cities and Chedorlaomer and his confederates in the Vale of Siddim (14:3,8,10). After having swept through the highlands east of the River Jordan and into the Neg-ev, they swung around and encamped in Hazazon-tamar, which is En-gedi (2 Chron 20:2). The armies would have met in between these two locations, in



the area northwest of the Dead Sea, where Qumran is located [see Ritmeyer's associated map]. We are told that the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into slime pits (Heb. *elay pits*). The level of the Dead Sea has fluctuated throughout the ages. At present it is as low as in the time of Abraham. This fluctuation casts light on the statement that the Vale of Siddim is the Dead Sea (Gen. 14:3). When the water level is low, the land is above the level of the sea and is called a *vale* (*emek*), but when the water levels are high, this area is submerged and becomes part of the Dead Sea. Since 2009, sinkholes have appeared in this area. This happens only when the water recedes, and they are getting larger each year. It must have been into such sinkholes that these two kings fell.¹²

When one is aware of the geographical and geological facts, Schlegel's statement that the meaning of Siddim, *lime*, *whitewash* (LXX *salty*), and the pits in the region suggest a more southern location for Sodom is thoroughly unconvincing. For one thing, *siddim* does not mean *lime*, *whitewash*. Its root has a range of meanings including *extension of land*, *adjacent land*, *battleground*, *farmland*, *furrows* etc. Logically, since *siddim* appears solely in Genesis 14 in the context of an area of land upon which a battle occurred—some of which was likely cultivated—and which was adjacent to the Dead Sea, the term is natural to the storyline. Ritmeyer is exactly right on this.

While *siddim* certainly did not mean *salt*, the LXX translators no doubt derived that meaning from its equation with the Salt (*melach*) Sea in the same sentence. However, if Schlegel wants a reason to link *salt* with Sodom, then he should visit Tall el-Hammam a few days after a good rain. When the ground—which is comprised mainly of ash and decomposed mudbricks—dries out, its heavy salt content crystallizes in the soil, forming a whitish crust over the surface. When you walk on it, it makes a crunching sound as when treading across re-frozen snow.

S: Also, locating Sodom and Gomorrah in the south fits better the post-destruction environment described by the prophets (Deut 29:23; Isa 13:19-20; Jer 49:18, 50:40; Zeph 2:9) and a later battle between Judah and Edom at the site of Zair (from the same Hebrew word as Zoar to which Lot fled (2 Kings 8:21).

¹² L. Ritmeyer, "Discovery of a Lost City," in *Testimony—for the Study and Defense of the Holy Scripture, Special Issue: Genesis—the Seedbed of the Bible* 83.983 (May/June 2013) 242.

C: This is not serious hermeneutics or geography. This is a modern-day etiology spun by Schlegel in an attempt to salvage the SST from the trash-heap of bad ideas. To make a case for a southern Sodom based on the supposition that that area looks more like the aftermath of a place God would have destroyed borders on ludicrousness. If the geography of the text does not take you there in the first place—which it certainly does not—then why go there at all? For that matter, the area between Masada and the Dead Sea is about as barren a landscape as one can imagine. With Schlegel's reasoning, Sodom might be there! Sadly, this is exactly where the late pseudo-archaeologist, R. Wyatt, placed Sodom and he saw the naturally-formed and eroded Dead Sea marls of the area as the remains of Sodom's great temples and palaces, replete with sulfur balls! What do such ridiculous etiologies have to do with Sodom's location? Absolutely nothing.

I will deal with Mr. Schlegel's views on Zoar subsequently.

S: I believe we will always have problems trying to locate Sodom and Gomorrah. Besides significant geological/geographical changes to the region associated with the divine destruction (Gen 13:10), the divine destruction probably didn't leave much (any?) of the cities to be found.

C: I agree that if Mr. Schlegel continues to insist that Sodom is in the southern Dead Sea area, that he will always have problems trying to locate Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, he will never locate them, because they were not there to begin with. But locating Sodom and the Cities of the Plain is not difficult when the biblical directions to them are correctly ascertained and followed. Indeed, we followed the textual geography and found them!

As I have pointed out on many occasions, there are more geographical data-points in the Bible for the location of Sodom than there are for Jerusalem.¹³ As a result, we were able not only to determine precisely the location and extent of the Kikkar of the Jordan, but also we were able to conclude that the largest Bronze Age city on the eastern Kikkar was, in fact, Sodom itself. We now know that that massive site, Tall el-Hammam, was the core of a powerful city-state that dominated the region for over 2000 years

¹³ Collins and Scott, *Discovering the City of Sodom* 273-296.

prior to its destruction ca. 1700 BCE. If this great city-state is not the geographical foundation of the biblical Cities of the Kikkar, then what *is* it? Why does not Genesis 13:1-12 mention that Lot travelled through the territory of such a magnificent city-state^o which he would have had to do!^o on his way down to the southern Dead Sea area to find Sodom amidst ancient towns that were in ruins hundreds of years before Abra(ha)m was born? Of course, that would be ridiculous beyond measure. But that is the kind of thing that SST advocates, like Schlegel, are trying to sell to students of the Bible.

Do not forget that the eastern Kikkar of the Jordan remained without cities and towns for seven centuries after its destruction. Even after the area began to recover^o it was always, and is, well-watered because of the topography and geology of the Transjordan^o people refused to build there. Fear, driven by local lore about the place, probably fed that phenomenon. Even after the Kikkar recovered sufficiently to support a collection of relatively small towns, the landscape was still dotted with ancient, ashen ruins that, no doubt, evoked thoughts of the evil cities that brought down the wrath of God. The reminders of annihilation were visible all around them. This may be the implication of Ezekiel 16:50: Sodom was *o*haughty and committed abominations before me; therefore, I did away with them, as you have seen.^o This would not be surprising given that the eastern Kikkar of the Jordan is fully visible from atop the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus.

Mr. Schlegel^s goes on to state: *o*Besides significant geological/geographical changes to the region associated with the divine destruction (Gen 13:10), the divine destruction probably didn^t leave much (any?) of the cities to be found.+ Factually speaking, geological changes to the Rift Valley in the past seven or eight millennia have been minimal. During this period of time wet/dry climate cycles have raised and lowered the level of the Dead Sea, and normal erosional forces have taken their toll. But all things considered, the landscape today probably looks very similar to how it appeared in the time of Abra(ha)m and Lot.¹⁴ During that time lake levels were at or near the

¹⁴ That is, except for the annual inundation in the Kikkar of the Jordan that occurred in the springtime in antiquity. Depending on the level of the Dead Sea, the Jordan waters could spread up to six^o even eight or more^o kilometers wide above the mouth of

historic low. The southern area around Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira was as dead as today, and virtually uninhabited. Also, his speculation about the possible non-existence of the Cities of the Kikkar post-destruction is unverifiable. Schlegel^s comments at this point are neither here nor there in terms of what the text says or implies about the nature of Sodom^s destruction.

S: The Hebrew for these cities^s destruction is unique (a combination of *shachet* *o*destroy+ and *hafach*, *o*burn upside down+). It is unlikely that any of these tells/ruins in the Rift (north or south) are Sodom or Gomorrah. More likely is that these ruins represent peripheral cities, perhaps one was Zoar, which were spared the divine judgment.

C: Once again, Schlegel stumbles into a hermeneutical travesty. Hebrew *shachat* is common to the language of obliteration in the OT. It is used dozens of times from Genesis to Malachi to describe all manner of destructions^o of persons, groups, buildings, armies, nations, and host of other things. Its application in the context of Sodom (as in Gen 19:29) is without specificity and simply captures the reality of its demise. The usage of *shachat* with reference to Sodom and the Cities of the Kikkar is in no way out of the ordinary.

Similarly, *hafach* is used dozens of times throughout the OT to denote a variety of catastrophes in a wide range of contexts. While *o*overturn^o is one literal meaning of its Semitic root, it is most often used idiomatically to depict the demise of anything and everything from people to cities to nations. Indeed, there is nothing at all unique about *hafach* as applied to Sodom and the Cities of the Kikkar. In Jonah 3:4 the prophet cries, *o*Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (*hafach*)!^o In Haggai 2:22 Yahweh proclaims, *o*I will overturn (*hafach*) royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow (*hafach*) chariots and their drivers!^o

So, what Schlegel says about *shachat* and *hafach* relative to Sodom and Gomorrah is categorically false. Why does he allow himself this glaring linguistic misstatement? It is obviously to support his blind acceptance of the SST. Both terms are descriptive of the *fact* of the divinely-aimed catastrophe, but neither is

the river. Unlike today, the Jordan in ancient times was a significant river with *o*Nile-like^o properties, although on a smaller scale.

useful for describing the specificity of its *nature*. There is plenty of narrative language in Genesis 19 describing the event¹⁵ enough so that a reasonable astrophysical cause is perhaps discernible (I have written a good amount on this subject).¹⁵

Schlegel's speculation regarding the likelihood that these ruins represent peripheral cities, perhaps one was Zoar, which were spared the divine judgment is a stab in the dark. All the arable lands in the Rift Valley as well as the ancient cities and towns they supported are well known. The settlement patterns of the middle and southern Ghor, period to period, are well documented. So, where might these missing cities of the Land of the Kikkar (Gen 19:28) have been located? Of course, we need not ask this question, and there is no necessity to speculate about undetectable, disintegrated cities. This is because the ruins of the Cities of the Kikkar *do* exist exactly where Genesis 13:1-12 says they ought to be!

S: Tall el-Hamman is an interesting dig. There is no question that this is the region where Israel camped before striking across the Jordan. Tall el-Hamman may be Abel-Shittim (Num 33:49). But this could be a problem for the excavators: identifying the Iron Age remains at Tall el-Hamman with another Israelite town goes against identifying Tall el-Hamman with Sodom, because it is unlikely that what once was Sodom became the Israelites' Abel-Shittim.

C: Once again, Schlegel tries to rain on the ever-advancing Hammam/Sodom juggernaut to no avail. If he had read my extensive treatments¹⁶ of the subjects he broaches in this paragraph, he would already be aware of the historical geography and how the associated names came about, and how this confirms the biblical record of the northern Sodom. I will summarize.

¹⁵ Collins and Scott, *Discovering the City of Sodom* 200-230; S. Collins, "Terms of Destruction for the Cities of the Plain," *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.16 (2002).

¹⁶ Collins and Scott, *Discovering the City of Sodom* 51-57; K. Schath, S. Collins and H. Aljarrah, "The Excavation of an Undisturbed Demi-Dolmen and Insights from the Hammam Megalithic Field, 2011 Season," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 55 (2011) 329-350; see also K. Prag, "The Dead Sea Dolmens: Death and the Landscape," in S. Campbell and A. Green (eds.), *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Oxbow Monograph 51, 1995) 75-84.

During the time of Abra(ha)m and Lot, the Kikkar of the Jordan was a verdant land of plenty. This is confirmed abundantly in the archaeological record which reveals the existence of a powerful city-state in the Kikkar for over 2000 years during the Bronze Age. When Moses arrived with the Israelites, the same area is described as "the valley in Moab where the top of Pisgah overlooks the wasteland" (Num 21:20). Indeed, it was an abandoned wasteland, and no one was home. Part of that valley had, in the time of Joseph, taken on the appellation "Abel" which means "mourning" or "mourning a catastrophe." Joseph brought the body of Jacob there with a large Egyptian entourage—no doubt to the extensive megalithic necropolis surrounding Tall el-Hamman¹⁷ for seven days of mourning before crossing over the Jordan to bury Jacob near Hebron (Gen 50:1-14). Because of what must have been an impressive ceremonial display by the Egyptians, the locals added to what was likely the already-existing place-name, "Abel" ("place of mourning"), the word "Mizraim" ("Abel-Mizraim" = "place of Egyptian mourning"). Since the destruction of the Cities of the Kikkar, the area had likely taken on the term "Abel" because of the thousands of memorial monuments—dolmens, standing stones, and stone circles—in the vicinity, if not as a remembrance of the destruction of the cities themselves.

It is interesting to note that the area was also called "Abel" ("mourning") on the Egyptian map lists of the 18th Dynasty, with which Moses would have been familiar.¹⁸ The uninhabited area still held the name "Abel" in the time of Moses, but had taken on the descriptor "Shittim," probably because of the many acacia trees that are abundant in the area (even today). Thus, it is not surprising that Tall el-Hamman has been identified by many scholars as Abel-Shittim. But it was a place, not a town or city. The area remained abandoned in the aftermath of Sodom's destruction.

I can find no sense at all in Schlegel's next statement: "this could be a problem for the excavators: identifying the Iron Age remains at Tall el-Hamman with another Israelite town goes against identifying

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ C.R. Krahmalkov, "Exodus Itinerary Confirmed by Egyptian Evidence," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20.5 (1994) 54-62; see also J. Simons, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 1959.

Tall el-Hamman with Sodom, because it is unlikely that what once was Sodom became the Israelites' Abel-Shittim. I just repeated it, and I still cannot grasp the gist of it. Is he saying that the IA2 ruins at Hammam are Abel-Shittim? That would be bizarre. Is he saying that Moses could not have brought the Israelites to the same location as Abel-Shittim as the former Cities of the Kikkar? What would be the reason for this? They *had* to go there to cross the Jordan fords! Moses certainly knew that the circular area north of the Dead Sea was still known in his day as *hakikkar*, and specifically mentions it in Deuteronomy 34:3. On what basis is this scenario 'unlikely'? Again, it is only brought up as a smokescreen in an attempt to save a dying SST.

As one can easily see, Mr. Schlegel's arguments against Tall el-Hammam as Sodom makes no sense in the real world of geography and archaeology.

ANSWERING SCHLEGEL ON ZOAR

In the July/August 2013 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, in 'Queries and Comments,' I answered a reader's question about Zoar prompted by my March/April 2013 *BAR* article, 'Where is Sodom?: The Case for Tall el-Hammam.' Here is my answer:

The location of Zoar south of the current Dead Sea, as is typically pictured on Bible maps, is wrong. This location is based on the sixth-century C.E. Madaba mosaic map, which shows Zoar south of the Dead Sea. But at that time the Dead Sea was at a historic low. In the sixth century, the Dead Sea was only half as large as it was later (until recently when the southern half again dried up). In times of low water levels, the southern half of what we know as the Dead Sea dried up. So 'south of the Dead Sea' in the sixth century (as portrayed on the Madaba map) is not the same as 'south of the current Dead Sea.'

The southern half of the Dead Sea, even when it is full, is very shallow, unlike the deep northern basin. Even when the southern half is inundated, a tongue of land, or peninsula, juts out into the southeastern part of the sea. This tongue is known as the Lisan (which means 'tongue' in Hebrew). It is shown on all modern maps of the Dead Sea. But on the Madaba map, the tongue isn't there, which is one way we know that the Dead Sea included only the northern half at that time.

So, south of the Dead Sea at the time of the Madaba map doesn't mean the same thing as south

of the Dead Sea in the modern period.

And nothing in the Bible places Sodom south of the Dead Sea. Indeed, careful comparison and analysis of Deuteronomy 2:3-5,9, 34:1-3 and Joshua 13:8-28 reveals that Zoar was the southern geographical marker of the Reuben/Gad Transjordan tribal allotment located at the Arnon Gorge (Wadi Mujib), as well as the northern border of Moab. Both Moab and Edom were off limits to Israelite conquest (by divine decree), making the traditional location of Zoar on the border between Edom and Moab impossible! It's also conceivable that Zoar was a tent-enclave (Zoar means 'insignificant' in Hebrew) that moved around relative to the purposes of its clan leaders. The southern location of Biblical Zoar has to be wrong.¹⁹

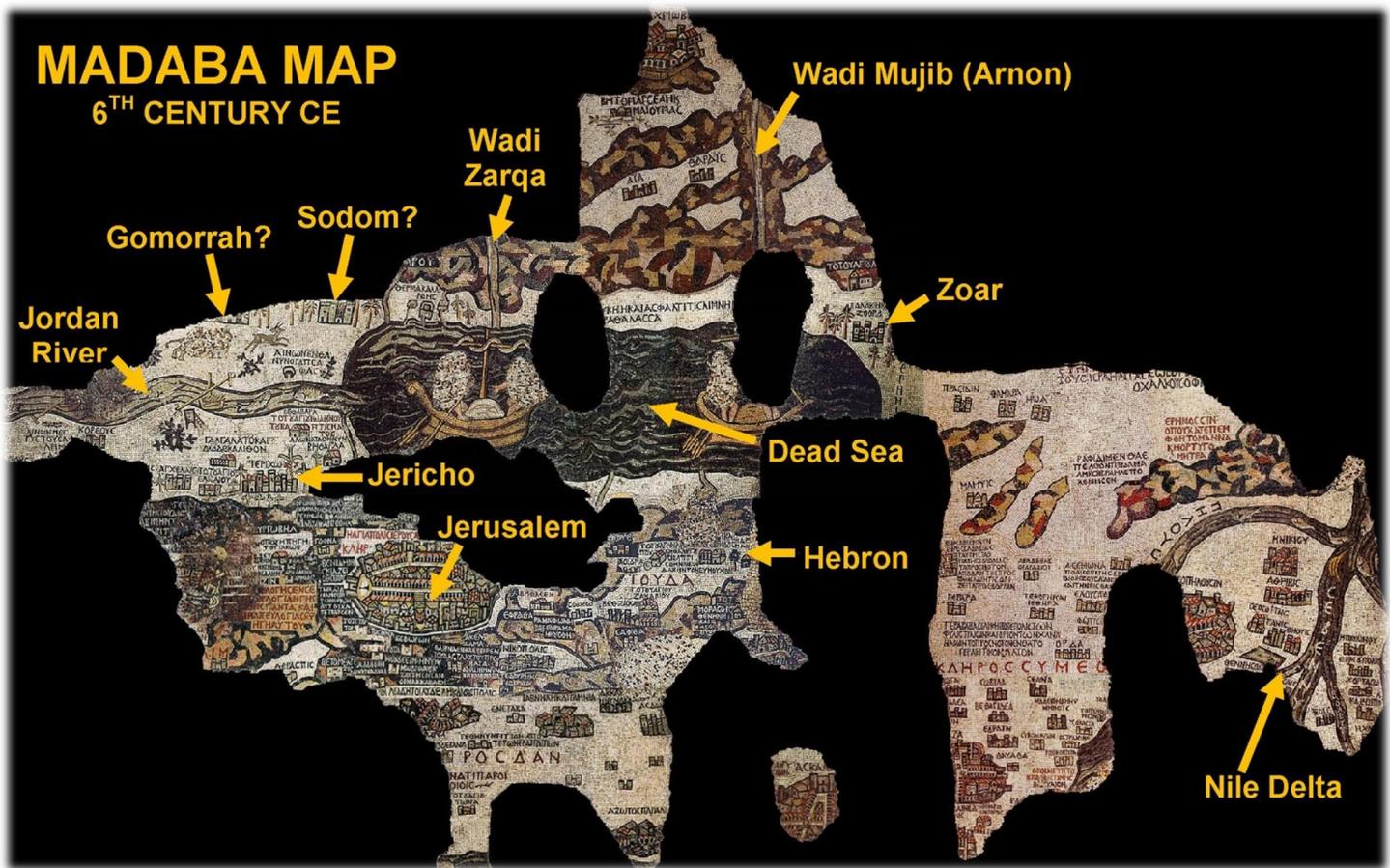
As is typical of SST devotees, Schlegel disagreed with my explanation of Zoar's location, and wrote a letter to *BAR*. The editors of *BAR* forwarded his comments to me, and asked me to respond to it for inclusion in a subsequent issue. Of course, my answer to him in *BAR* is a brief one. But what follows here are my detailed answers to his objections. His points are given in full, paragraph by paragraph, after which my responses appear all in the same format as above.

With all due respect, Mr. Schlegel's take on the location of Zoar is a classic case of 'seeing what one wants to see' and 'believing what one wants to believe' in spite of the facts. I will address his points vis-à-vis my location of Zoar at/near the confluence of the Arnon River (Wadi Mujib) with the Dead Sea in the order of his objections.

S: The Zered River, which drains into the southeastern part of the Dead Sea is depicted and clearly labeled on the Madaba Map. Zoar is located south of the mouth of the Zered River. The Madaba Map is not depicting only the northern half of the Dead Sea, as Collins asserts. Nor is the Lisan (Tongue) missing from the map because of low water levels. Perhaps exactly the opposite is true: the Madaba Map depicts no Lisan because of high water levels.

C: His first protestation has to do with the 6th century CE Madaba Map (see the Madaba Map). I have studied this map in detail for many years. Most recently, in shooting a documentary for National Geographic, the entire floor of the Byzantine church which contains the mosaic map was cleared and cleaned so that I could personally examine it in detail (on my hands

¹⁹ S. Collins, in 'Queries and Comments,' *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39.4 (2013) 10-11.



and knees!). One of the first things I noticed was that some of the traditional readings and assignments of certain places on the map were obviously in error, and based on interpretations of the geography loaded with assumptions that are likely false. The locations on the map noted by Schlegel are among them.

He assumes that the large river representation on the map just north of Zoara (Zoar) is the Zered. However, the letters preserved on the map, although usually read ὄAREDῶ are actually ὄAREAῶ. There is an alpha at the end, but no delta. But even if it was ὄZaredῶ, the placement of the Zered River on any map is made based on one's predisposition about Zoar, and not on any objective information about the Zered River's location. If one placed Zoar on the Arnon/Wadi Mujib, then, it could be labeled ὄZaredῶ! This is precisely what Neev and Emery do in identifying the Wadi Tarfawiyaῶ a branch of the Wadi Mujibῶ as the Zered River.²⁰

²⁰ D. Neev and K. O. Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jericho: Geological, Climatological, and Archaeological Background* (New York: Oxford University, 1995) 131-138.

So, what is *actually* represented on the Madaba Map? In spite of Schlegel's protestations, it is an *absolute fact* that the Madaba Map features only the deep northern basin of the Dead Sea. This is detailed quite nicely in Neev and Emery's geological work and numerous other resources.²¹ Based on a variety of data-sets dealing with ancient Dead Sea levels, it's clear that during the Roman and Byzantine Period the level of the Dead Sea was even lower than todayῶ about -440m. As Neev and Emery point out, at the time when the Madaba Map was made there was *no shallow S basin*, thus no Lisan Peninsula. Zoar was then a deep-water port on the Bay of Mazraῶa at the south end of the northern basin. Also, there was a Roman road going east/west over the Lisan (not pos-

²¹ A. Frumkin, G. Kadan, E. Yehouda, and Y. Eyal, ὄRadiocarbon Chronology of the Holocene Dead Sea: Attempting A Regional Correlation,ῶ *Radiocarbon* 43.3 (2001) 1187; A. Frumkin, and Y. Elitzur, ὄThe Rise and Fall of the Dead Sea,ῶ *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27.6 (Nov/Dec 2001); D. Langgut and F. Neumann, ὄThe Paleo-Climatic History of the Middle Bronze ῶ Iron Age Time Interval: High Resolution Pollen Study of Dead Sea Cores,ῶ a paper presented to the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research.

sible when the southern basin is filled). Today, at the present near-historic low-level (-427m), you can easily see Roman and Byzantine ruins along the eastern shoreline of the Dead Sea, right next to the water—even *in* the water!

Mr. Schlegel's suggestion that perhaps exactly the opposite is true—the Madaba Map depicts no Lisan because of high water levels—is made in abject ignorance of the facts. As Neev and Emery state: "As Zoar of the 1st century A.D. was a seaport, it had to be on the shore and must have been north of [the paved Roman road traversing the Lisan] or near the head of the Bay of Mazra'a [at the S end of the N basin]. The absence of any geographic indication for the [Lisan] peninsula's existence on the Madaba Map leads to a similar conclusion. Such an outstanding and picturesque tongue-like shore would not have been overlooked by the artist-cartographer of that map." They further state that "Postures of two cargo vessels portrayed on the Madaba Map imply that the main traffic was between Zoar, port at the SE corner of the N basin, and the N coast as close as possible to Jericho, the gate to Judea. The Bay of Mazra'a was always the main, if not the only, natural deepwater haven. If Zoar were at Es-Safi, it never could have functioned as an efficient harbor."²²

The -440m level of the Dead Sea during the Byzantine Period is not open to question. That level eliminates both the shallow southern basin and the Lisan Peninsula, leaving only the capsule-shaped, deep northern basin as represented on the Madaba Map. Why would Schlegel so casually dismiss the abundant geological and archaeological evidence in support of this fact? The answer to this question is obvious: To support the SST, all evidences in support of a northern Sodom must be ignored or brushed aside. But these facts are not going to go away. They are here to stay.

S: Collins's attempt to move Zoar from near the mouth of the Zered to near the mouth of the Arnon is faulty as well (by the way, the Arnon River is depicted on the Madaba Map, further north). He cites Deuteronomy 2:4-5, 9, 34:1-3 and Joshua 13:8-28 as evidence that because Israel was not to displace Moab

or Edom, Zoar cannot be as far south as the mouth of the Zered. Collins fails to realize that the territory of Moab forbidden to Israel was in the heights above the Rift Valley. The Rift Valley and the Dead Sea are distinct regions, which were not forbidden, to Israel as far as Zoar.

C: Given that the Madaba Map shows only the deep northern basin, the large "river" representation to the north of Zoar is none other than the Wadi Mujib (biblical Arnon River/Gorge). It is exactly where it is supposed to be, including being virtually due east of Hebron on the map! There are just two major wadis emptying into the northern Dead Sea basin: the Wadi Mujib and the Wadi Zarqa-Ma'in farther north. Thus, the northern (and correctly smaller) "river" represented is the Wadi Zarqa. If this is not the case, then the Madaba Map would have to be declared a hopeless geographical distortion unsuitable for cartographic purposes.

As for Schlegel's view of Deuteronomy 2:4-5,9, 34:1-3 and Joshua 13:8-28, I can only say that it borders on out-and-out fabrication. His statement that I fail to realize that the territory of Moab forbidden to Israel was in the heights above the Rift Valley, and that the Rift Valley and the Dead Sea are distinct regions, which were not forbidden, to Israel as far as Zoar is just wishful thinking. The territories of Moab and Edom (and the Ammon, for that matter) followed their wadi/river borders right into the Rift Valley. Indeed, in the time of Moses, even the valley floor northeast of the Dead Sea was called the Plains of Moab!

Logically, if Zoar (according to Deut 34:1-3) was a southern border marker of the Israelite Transjordan allotment, then it could *not* have straddled the border between two kingdoms declared by Yahweh to be *off-limits to the Israelites!*²³ That the Reuben/Gad tribal allotment stretched from "the Kikkar of the Valley of Jericho, City of Palms, as far as Zoar" is clearly marking out its southern border at the Arnon River/Gorge, the natural and perpetual border between the Transjordan Israelites and Moabites.²⁴ The Ro-

²² Neev and Emery, *Destruction* 131-138; see also G. Hadas, "Dead Sea Sailing Routes During the Herodian Period," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society*, Volume 26 (London, 2008) 31-36.

²³ S. Collins, "Rethinking the Location of Zoar: An Exercise in Biblical Geography," *Biblical Research Bulletin* VI.3 (2006).

²⁴ A.F. Rainey and R.S. Notley, *The Sacred Bridge* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006) 133, 136, 146, 162, 175.

man/Byzantine Zoar is in the same vicinity, just S of where the Wadi Mujib/Arnon empties into the Dead Sea. The port of Zoar was likely moved to the Bay of Mazra'a to avoid the catastrophic flash floods disgorging from the Wadi Mujib during seasonal rains.

Joshua 13:8-28 delineates the southern border of the Reubenites and Gadites as extending from Aroer on the [north] rim of the Arnon Gorge [Wadi Mujib], and from the town in the midst of the gorge, and included the whole plateau of Medeba as far as Dibon, and all the towns of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, out to the border of the Amorites. The southern border is an east-to-west line beginning at Aroer and running westward to an unnamed town. I maintain that this town is none other than Zoar, especially in light of Deuteronomy 24:1-3.

That the sound of [Moab's] cry rises from Heshbon to Elealeh and Jahaz, from Zoar as far as Horonaim and Eglath Shelishiyah (Jer 48:34) indicates, in this north-to-south sequence, that Zoar is in the middle of the (then) Moabite territory (in a time when the northern border of Moab had moved further north to include Heshbon).

S: Moving Zoar to the mouth of the Arnon doesn't improve Collins's case for Sodom anyway. From the Arnon mouth to Tall-Hammam, where he wants to place Sodom, is still over 40 miles.

C: As for the distance from Tall el-Hammam to Zoar at the confluence of the Arnon with the Dead Sea it is 27 miles, not over 40 miles as Schlegel states. We also know that the Dead Sea level in the time of Abra(ha)m (MB2) was approximately the historic low, as today. This provided a walkable shelf-like shoreline as a relatively easy route between the two.²⁵ Additionally, the statement of Genesis 19:23 that the sun had risen over the land when Lot came to Zoar is better understood as the sun had gone forth over the land, and Lot came to Zoar, that is, the sun had completed its daily course and was in the process

²⁵ I have personally walked along the present shelf-beach most of the distance from Tall el-Hammam to the Wadi Mujib. At low levels between -420 and -440 this allows for a significant roadway along the entire eastern shore of the Dead Sea. When lake levels are higher, the shelf disappears and the eastern shore becomes virtually impassible except by boat or barge which would not have been a bad way to traverse the distance!

of setting in the west by the time Lot reached Zoar. Thus, Lot had from dawn to dusk to travel from Sodom (Tall el-Hammam) to Zoar.

S: The best location for Zoar is on the southeast side of the Dead Sea.

C: The best location for Zoar is *not* on the SE corner of the Dead Sea's shallow (sometimes nonexistent) southern basin, but on the southeast corner of the deep northern basin, where, in fact, the Madaba Map places Byzantine Zoar. But there is another feature of the Madaba Map that I have not mentioned, and this is a good place to delve into it.

The Madaba Map is a pilgrim map of biblical sites (see Madaba Map). Its inclusion of Zoar a small and insignificant place according to Genesis is due to its association with Lot. Thus, one might expect to find Sodom and Gomorrah the more important cities of the story on the map as well. It is of significance to realize that the area south of Zoar on the Madaba Map contains no visible city representations. By contrast, the area immediately northeast of the Dead Sea has two distinct city representations, but the captions are missing. It is perfectly logical to suggest that they are Sodom and Gomorrah. Speculation? Yes. Unreasonable? Not in the least.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THIS EXERCISE

As the proverbial coffin lid closes on the southern Sodom theory as a result of the recent and overwhelming evidence for Sodom's location northeast of the Dead Sea advocates of the SST are now attempting to create arguments in their favor out of thin air. As can be seen from Mr. Schlegel's challenges the SST simply has nothing to stand on other than poor hermeneutics and geographical distortions.

The *only* argument against the Hammam/Sodom connection that has established traction among some conservative scholars is that of so-called disparate chronologies. But this objection has been removed²⁶ except in the minds of those who refuse to give up their Ussherian²⁷ chronological methodology in un-

²⁶ Collins, *Tall el-Hammam...Critical Data-Sets*.

²⁷ By Ussherian I mean those who take the Genesis patriarchal lifespan numbers as base-10, arithmetic values, and configure their biblical chronology accordingly. See Collins, *Tall el-Hammam...Critical Data-Sets*.

derstanding the patriarchal lifespan numbers in Genesis. For those who are intractable on this position, there is no amount of evidence—textual, geographical, archaeological, or otherwise—that will convince them. However, I urge those, thus entrenched, not to succumb to the kind of grasping-at-straws exhibited by W. Schlegel (and others) in attempting to discredit Tall el-Hammam's identification as biblical Sodom. Neither biblical studies nor archaeology is enhanced by such an approach.

Finally, I remind the reader that I was once an aggressive supporter of the southern Sodom theory, specifically that Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were likely Sodom and Gomorrah. After decades of believing this, I was initially convinced otherwise on the basis of the textual evidence. When I, for the first time, read through the Sodom tales with a critical eye toward the geography, the southern Sodom idea evaporated under the bright light of diligent exegesis. That led to further research and eventually exploration. Comprehensive exploration led to Tall el-Hammam. Today, as we enter the ninth season of excavation at this remarkable site, every data-set we examine points to its identification as Sodom. All I can ask is that those investigating the subject do so by thinking critically, evidentially, and thoroughly.

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