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Canon Tristram Fires a Lethal Shot at the Southern Sodom Theory: Excerpts from *The Land of Moab: Travels and Discoveries on the East Side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan*

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Abstract:

Many biblical scholars who frequented the Dead Sea region during the 19th century favored a location for the Cities of the Plain northeast of the Dead Sea. They did so based on clear statements in Genesis 13:1-12 as to their location on the Kikkar of the Jordan. Once they had visited the entire region, it became obvious to geographical thinkers like H.B. Tristram that the Cities of the Plain belonged to the Jordan Valley proper, not the southern end of the Dead Sea.



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Canon Tristram Fires a Lethal Shot at the Southern Sodom Theory: Excerpts from *The Land of Moab: Travels and Discoveries on the East Side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan*

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from The Land of Moab: Travels and Discoveries on the East Side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan by Canon Henry Baker Tristram, published on 1874.¹ Tristram was an able and relentless geographer who traveled the ancient Bible lands for the specific purpose of identifying biblical locations based on geographical indicators for those locations embedded in the biblical texts. Tristram's writings, along with many other 19th century explorers, located the biblical Cities of the Plain, including Sodom, north of the Dead Sea and, generally, east of the Jordan River. This conclusion was drawn from a straightforward analysis of the biblical geography of Genesis 13:1-12 and other passages which, in the mind of Tristram, and others like him, clearly located them on that parcel of the eastern Jordan Disk (= kikkar) that was opposite Jericho, and easily visible from the high terrain around Bethel and Ai. We pick up Tristram's geographical narrative at Mount Nebo (some minor editing has been performed for ease of reading):

From Nebo we looked down on our right, northwards, into the Wady Ayun Moussa (Springs of Moses), which rises to the north-east of it, and runs out into the Ghor Seisaban (Plains of Shittim), opposite Beth Jesimoth...By this wady would be the natural ascent to Nebo from the plains below; and by it, doubtless, Moses ascended with Joshua to the crest of the range. We could trace the line of the path the whole way up. Three other ravines, up which there are paths, lead from the same plains to the heights; one by the Wady Heshban to the north of Ayun Moussa; and the Wady Na'ur, north of this again, the largest of all these valleys. The furthest up is the Wady N'meirah...

There is an identity, more exact than often occurs in ancient and modern nomenclature, between the Hebrew *Zo'ar*, and the Arabic *Zi'ara*; and it is to be noted that the Jerusalem Targum writes the name [in a manner] still more closely identified with the Arabic. It seems evident, on a careful examination of the scriptural account of "the cities of the plain," that they must have been situated in the "ciccar," or "ghor," of Jordan, at the north end of the Dead Sea.

It is unnecessary to recapitulate at length the arguments for assigning this site. That they were submerged, we have no historical record whatever; and the whole tenor, both of the history and of geological evidence, is directly opposed to such an hypothesis. There are thus only two possible localities, the lower end of the lake and the upper. Formerly the southern site was assumed (as by Dr. Robinson) without question; from the general tradition, which cannot be traced further back than the time of Josephus and Jerome, who speak of a Zoar in that region. This view was further supported by the name of Jebel Usdum (? Sodom) at the south end, and by

¹ 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) 326-333.

the name of "Lot's Wife," given to the many pillars of salt detached from time to time from the salt cliffs. But Professor Palmer has found a "Bint Sheikh Lot " (Lot's wife) midway up the eastern side, which considerably weakens the force of this coincidence of name. But for the northern site we have the argument from the simple statement of the inspired writer, who calls them "the cities of the plain," or circle, "ciccar," of [the] Jordan, an expression which cannot possibly apply to any other than the northern end of the Dead Sea.

Abraham and Lot were standing between Bethel and Hai, when "Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east" (Gen. xiii. 10, 11). Now, from these hills it is impossible to gain a glimpse of the south end of the Dead Sea, shut off by distance and by lofty intervening mountains; while the plain of Jericho, and its far more extensive sister plain of Shittim, or the Seisaban, on the east side of the river, are spread almost at the beholder's feet. Corroborative arguments may also be found in the incident mentioned (Gen. xix. 28), that "Abraham from Mamre looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain," after the destruction of the cities. Though the vale itself is not visible from the hills above Hebron or Mamre, yet the depression between the nearer hills and those of Gilead can be perceived, and Abraham could at once identify the locality whence the smoke arose.

Again, in the account of the raid of Chedorlaomer (Gen. xiv.) we find that the invader, after he smote the Horites in Mount Seir (or Edom), then attacked the Amalekites and the Amorites, in Hazon Tamar, or Engedi. After this, he met the King of Sodom and his confederates in the Vale of Siddim, and returned towards Damascus. The account of Chedorlaomer's route is quite unintelligible if the cities were south of the Dead Sea, but if they were to the north of it, there is perfect topographical sequence in the whole narrative. The re-discovery of the site of Zoar in Zi'ara also at once explains an expression which has been a most perplexing crux to every biblical geographer. In the view granted to Moses from Mount Nebo (Deut. xxxiv. 3) he beheld "the south, and the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm-trees, unto Zoar." I had always been perplexed by this expression, and was led at one time to suggest that Zoar might have been on the west side, near the headland of Feshkhah (Pisgah), some miles south of Jericho, and visible from Nebo.