

BIBLICAL RESEARCH BULLETIN

The Academic Journal of Trinity Southwest University

ISSN 1938-694X

Volume II

Number 16

Terms of Destruction for the Cities of the Plain

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Abstract:

This paper is an assessment of the biblical language regarding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Cities of the Plain. The analysis reveals that the language is often ambiguous and certainly open to a variety of interpretations.



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This article is adapted from a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Near East Archaeological Society in 2002. Some format irregularities may exist.

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Terms of Destruction for the Cities of the Plain

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According to the Bible, the Cities of the Plain (Plain = Kikkar = Disk, i.e., Jordan Disk¹) and their immediate environs met a catastrophic end. The fire that consumed the area is described in such violent terms that most scholars consider the account of their destruction either to be fictional or the residual historical memory of a powerful geological phenomenon that most likely took place in the prehistoric past. The biblical explanation is divine retribution. While there has been much speculation regarding the nature of the event, a good portion of it has stretched the grammatical boundaries of the biblical text to the breaking point and beyond. Therefore, it is important to clarify the biblical indicators of destruction, including both what the Bible does and does not say about the destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and the Kikkar. This exercise is relevant not only to our understanding of the event itself as recorded in the Book of Genesis, but also to the archaeological investigation of any site purported to be one of the Cities of the Plain.

KEY BIBLICAL INDICATORS OF DESTRUCTION

The following biblical data points are drawn from passages that deal specifically with the destruction of the Cities of the Plain. While a little imagination is often helpful in reconstructing pictures of past events, we must be careful not to get too carried away or unduly influenced by the many “Hollywood” and “television documentary” treatments of the event. With this in mind, the key biblical indicators are as follows (all passages are from Genesis):

“swept away” (19:15, 17). The divine messenger informs Lot and his family that Sodom was about to be annihilated and that they must escape the city lest they “be swept away when the city is punished...Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” The Hebrew term for “swept away” is *sph*, which almost invariably means “dramatic change or removal.”² While *sph* does not necessarily imply that whatever is “swept away” will cease to exist entirely without any visible residue, it does generally indicate, relative to the scope of the target of *sph*, that a comprehensive, categorical removal or destruction of the target is in view.³ From this language, we can safely say that Sodom was about to become the object of some divine *sph*, the results of which would leave the city somewhere between a pile of rubble and non-existence (see Figure 1).

¹ See S. Collins, “The Geography of the Cities of the Plain,” *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.1 (2002).

² P.J.J.S. Els, “6200 ספח,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 3 277-278.

³ Ibid.

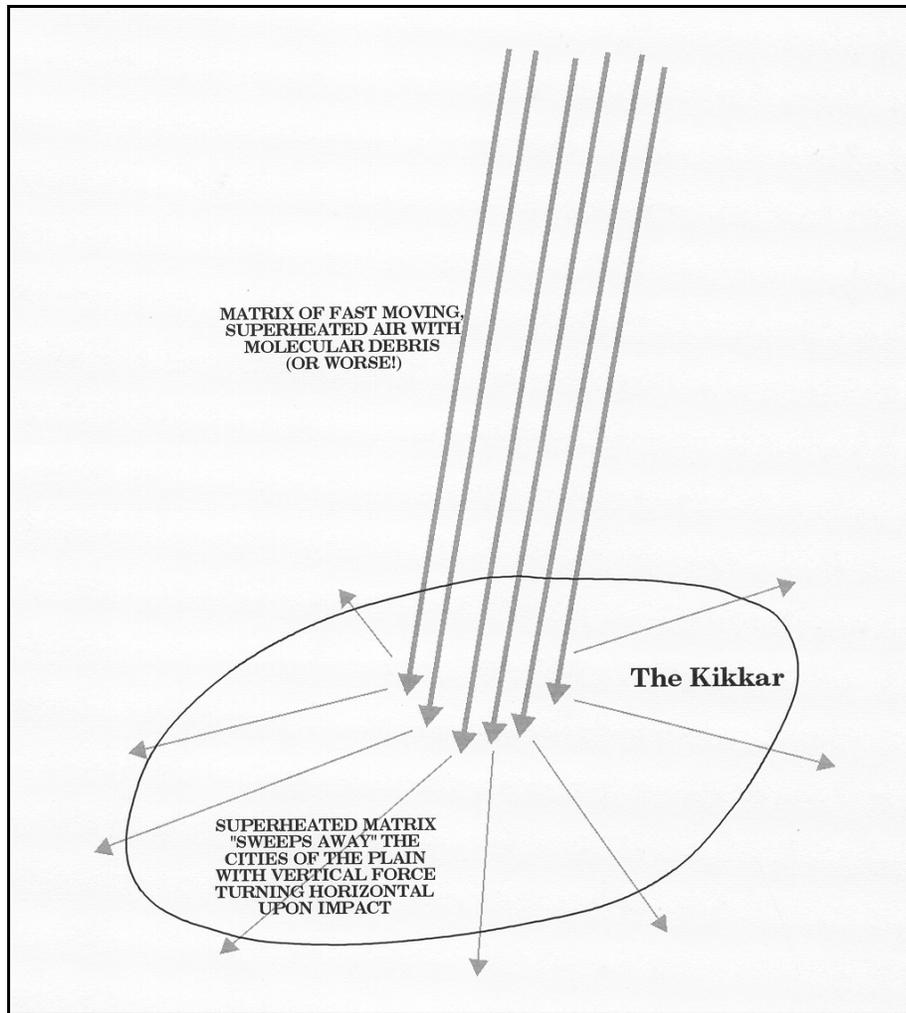


FIGURE 1

Regardless of the nature of the destruction that befell the Cities of the Plain, one thing is clear from the biblical text: the fiery blast came from above. Superheated air and/or some kind of impact, like that of a disintegrated comet fragment moving at a high rate of speed, could have obliterated virtually everything in its target area, perhaps leaving only the foundations of the largest structures.

“Yahweh rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah...out of the heavens” (19:24).

There are two terms used here in a doublet, “sulfur and fire,” a fact that is unclear in some translations. First of all, the consecutive construction does not at all imply that “fire” can or should be taken as a modifier of “sulfur.” Indeed, the two could be considered distinct, although I have no reason to press the issue other than to point out that the pairing of the two terms does not necessarily, or even normally, mean “burning sulfur.” The word translated “sulfur” is *goprit*.⁴ Used seven times in the Old Testament, *goprit* is itself often understood as “burning sulfur,” although that idea is mostly inferred from context rather than the basic meaning of the word. And

⁴ J.A. Naude, “גפרית 1730,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 1 889.

because the nominative of *goprit* “denotes an inflammable material of which lightning was held to consist (Ezekiel 38:22),”⁵ we cannot attribute a specific chemical meaning to the term, at least not in any modern, scientific sense. Thus, while *goprit* can refer to the naturally-occurring element, sulfur, its range of meaning is by no means confined thereto, especially when it proceeds from a heavenward direction. I also suspect that the application of the term to chemical sulfur, which is yellow in its solid, crystalline state, is a secondary semantic referent, the primary referent being the yellow glow of fire, lightning, or even the sun.⁶ The word for “fire” is *‘esh*.⁷ Simply put, *‘esh* can refer to “fire” of all kinds and descriptions, from sparks to cooking fires, from lightning to sunlight.

The implication of this particular language for our understanding of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain is to clarify what the text actually says and what it does not say. It says that whatever came from a heavenward direction to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah was a fiery phenomenon emitting (yellowish) light and possibly a thunderous noise. It does not say that the fire consisted of burning sulfur or that the burning material (gas? particles?) was sulfurous at all (although it certainly could have been). But whatever the exact nature of the fiery event, the results were catastrophic for the targeted locale.

“rained down...out of the heavens” (19:24). The fiery judgment came from a skyward direction. That is very clear from this passage. A Hebrew or Semitic cognate analysis would add nothing to what is plainly communicated by the translation. The implication is that the burning mass originated from above the surface of the Kikkar (plain). However, I suppose one could not rule out the idea that (gaseous?) material erupted high into the air from within the crust of the earth itself (through a fault or fissure?), somehow ignited, and then descended back to the surface, incinerating the Cities of the Plain. Such scenarios have been suggested.⁸

“he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities, and also the vegetation in the land” (19:25; see also 19:29). Much has been made of the term “overthrew.”⁹ The Hebrew word, *hpk*, has a range of meanings, including “turn, overturn,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ As I have discussed in Collins “Geography,” that which is more immediate and obvious usually serves as the primary referent of a word, whereas the same term can be applied to a secondary referent because it “looks like, acts like, seems like” the primary referent. In this case, the yellow glow of a fire (or lightning, or the sun) is likely the more intimate, immediate, and original meaning (primary referent) of the etymological root of Heb. *goprit* (Akk. *kupritu*), which at a later point in time was applied to the naturally-occurring chemical element, sulfur, because it was yellow and had a pungent smell not unlike odors given off by various burning materials. Such phenomenological applications of root words to secondary referents are very common in all languages. In language usage over time, it is not uncommon for the primary referent to be lost, and the word adapted as a symbol for the secondary referent. Only decades ago, in English, “cut a record” referred to the process of making an audio recording by literally cutting grooves in a plastic disk (primary referent). When you “cut a record” today, you make the audio recording (secondary referent) digitally on a computer and produce it on a compact disk, a process we then refer to as “cutting a CD.” Even today, many people have no idea that “cutting” a music album had anything to do with literally cutting grooves into plastic! To them it is simply a common idiom.

⁷ J.A. Naude, “836 שֶׁשׁ,” *NIDOTTE vol. 1* 532-537.

⁸ See Neev and Emery, *Destruction of Sodom*.

⁹ For example, in recent discussions with my good friend and colleague, Dr. L. Ritmeyer, he made the point that the Hebrew term *hpk* could indicate that the Cities of the Plain may have been built on the edge of plateaus overlooking the Jordan Valley and that, as part of the destruction scenario, earthquake activity may have caused the cities to be “overturned” as their earthen platforms crumbled into the valley below, the city-rubble being subsequently covered by a thick layer of dirt and rock. Frankly, I have no problem with such a scenario being allowed by the language of the biblical text, as long as we do not insist that this is

destroy, change.”¹⁰ With reference to what happened to the Cities of the Plain, the meaning of the related Akkadian term, *abaku*,¹¹ meaning “to overturn” or “turn upside down,” is often literalized to suggest that Sodom and Gomorrah were “overturned” as the result of a geological event of some kind which buried them under a layer of earth. While I would not categorically reject such an interpretation on lexical grounds, it would be just about the only such usage among dozens in the Old Testament. In such a context, the actual meaning is probably more like Akkadian *abiktu*, which denotes “defeat”¹² or “decisive defeat, massacre, carnage.”¹³ At any rate, the “overthrow” was not just of a city or two, but of “the entire plain” upon which the cities were located (see Figure 9).

“the entire plain (19:25). As I have established elsewhere,¹⁴ the Kikkar is in view here. If the “entire Kikkar” was destroyed, then not only was that portion lying east of the Jordan River affected, but also that area of the Kikkar west of the river, namely Jericho and its environs. Although the western Kikkar was not the primary target of destruction, it is reasonable to assume that it may have suffered serious collateral damage.

“all those living in the cities (19:25). The fiery catastrophe killed all the inhabitants of the Cities of the Plain. But is it possible that people living outside the city walls could have survived? I doubt it, since even the vegetation of the region was burned up. The animals probably would not have survived either.

“the vegetation in the land” (19:25). The Hebrew word translated “vegetation,” *tsemakh*, is interesting because it does not specifically refer to “plant life,” but to a “growth, shoot, [or] bud.”¹⁵ (For example, it is not the word *siakh*, used earlier in Genesis for “seed-bearing plant,” “green plant,” and “plant of the field.”¹⁶) So it is possible that the destruction of the vegetation (*tsemakh*) of the Kikkar consisted of the burning and/or scorching of new annual growth, or of new sprouts, shoots, and buds,¹⁷ but not necessarily a complete extermination of the regional flora. This holds important implications for the ability of at least nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples to re-inhabit the area in the post-conflagration era.

“[Abraham] looked down [from the area of Hebron] toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace” (19:28). Beyond the clear language of the translation, there is not much to be gained by examining the Hebrew text at this point. It is clear that Abraham, from some vantage point (probably) east of the Hebron vicinity, was able to see a huge, dense column of smoke rising

what it does say. In the case of the Cities of the Plain, the word *hpk* simply means “destroy,” but, admittedly, to a calamitous degree.

¹⁰ R.B. Chisholm, “2200 הפך,” *NIDOTTE vol. 1* 1048-1050.

¹¹ Ibid. See also Black, George, and Postgate, eds., *Dictionary of Akkadian 1*.

¹² Ibid. 2.

¹³ Chisholm, “הפך” 1048-1050.

¹⁴ Collins, “Geography.”

¹⁵ M.G. Abegg, Jr., “7541 צמח,” *NIDOTTE vol. 3* 815-817.

¹⁶ R.A. Taylor, “8489 שיח,” *NIDOTTE vol. 3* 1236.

¹⁷ The fire and/or heat could have caused the tender new growth to wither and die back, or it is possible that the local vegetation was burned back to the main branches or to the roots. It is also possible that the overall devastation could have had pockets with varying degrees of damage.

from the area of destruction, which could have been as large as 400 square kilometers.¹⁸ Smoke from such a calamity would have been visible at distances much greater than Hebron.

“dense smoke...like smoke from a furnace” (19:28). If there are any qualitative or quantitative indicators about the resultant smoke from the Kikkar conflagration, I cannot detect them. The idea of “dense” smoke is read into the Hebrew term (*qtr*) by some translators, but is not actually a feature of it. The Akkadian *qataru* carries the meaning “to smoke...blacken with smoke...be blackened, darkened,” “rise, billow,” and “make an incense offering,”¹⁹ but, like the equivalent Hebrew word, has nothing to say about the density, color (other than its sooty, darkened nature), or other noteworthy features of the smoke.²⁰ That it was “like smoke from a furnace (Heb. *kibshan*²¹)” may indicate the familiar columnar pattern of smoke that rose from ancient pottery kilns or smelting furnaces,²² but very little else, if anything, can be determined from etymological or semantic analysis.

A SUMMARY OF DESTRUCTION INDICATORS FROM THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Indicators rising from the biblical text provide some valuable information about the nature and scope of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain. In summary, here are the apparent facts derived from the language of destruction in the Genesis record of Sodom and Gomorrah:

1. Regardless of its point of origin, the fiery matrix that rained down upon the Cities of the Plain descended as if from the heavens, i.e., from the atmosphere above the plain (Kikkar).
2. When the burning (gaseous? sulfurous?) mass struck the surface of the plain, it caused the region’s cities and vegetation to burst into flames.
3. The thunderous fire-storm was so concentrated that the inhabitants of the entire area were unable to escape death either by burning or asphyxiation from breathing smoke and/or super-heated air.
4. In the aftermath, a great column of smoke, probably as much as fifteen to twenty kilometers in diameter, rose from the burning, scorched land and was easily visible from locations such as Hebron, which was fifty kilometers or more away.
5. The Cities of the Plain were catastrophically destroyed, “swept away,” i.e., left in utter ruin, if not entirely removed from the visible realm of existence, and the entire Kikkar region suffered an ecological disaster that may have required centuries of recovery before it could once again support permanent urban populations.

¹⁸ It seems from the biblical text that the entire plain (*kikkar*) region around Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim comprised the target area, not just the cities themselves. However, if the cities were the primary targets of the fiery force(s) that overcame them, it is not unreasonable to think that the surrounding area for some distance could have been burned or scorched secondarily by the intense heat issuing from the central conflagration.

¹⁹ Black, George, and Postgate, eds., *Dictionary of Akkadian* 286. See also R.E. Averbeck, “7787 קטר,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 3 913-916.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ I. Cornelius, “3901 כִּבְשָׁן,” *NIDOTTE* vol. 2 596-597.

²² B.G. Wood, *The Sociology of Pottery in Ancient Palestine* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); E.C. Lapp, “Metals,” *OEANE* vol. 4 1-20.

CLARIFYING WHAT THE BIBLICAL RECORD DOES AND DOES NOT SAY ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CITIES OF THE PLAIN

Up to this point I have discussed the apparent facts about the destruction of the Cities of the Plain, noting the allowable parameters of interpretation for key elements in the biblical narrative. All in all, the Bible is quite clear about what did and did not happen to those infamous cities. Yet while the biblical record has always been available for scholars and laymen alike to examine first-hand, it seems that, in spite of the text itself, the human imagination cannot help but create images of the events that do not necessarily conform to the only written record we have about the demise of those cities.

Of course, this kind of thing is done with other biblical stories as well. For example, in the stories about Jesus' carrying his cross to the place of execution, it is commonly depicted that when he stumbled beneath the weight of the cross—from exhaustion or weakness from torture—Simon the Cyrene was pressed into service to carry the cross for him. This event has been portrayed over and over again in films and Passion Week reenactments until the picture of Jesus falling to the ground under the cross has been permanently etched on the minds of millions of people. Yet none of the biblical gospels ever hints that Jesus stumbled or fell beneath the weight of the cross. It is not even suggested. Simon was indeed forced to carry Jesus' cross, but for other reasons, probably to satisfy Roman legal protocol.

In a similar fashion, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has elements in our telling of it that may or may not be supported by the biblical account. Just to set the record straight, I want to deal with these unnecessary ideas about the destruction of the Cities of the Plain and, in the process, reiterate the biblical parameters of the story that I have already discussed.

First, the biblical narrative does say that the plain upon which the four (not five) Cities of the Plain were located was the circular, flat region of the southern Jordan Valley immediately north of the Dead Sea (which is about 25 kilometers in diameter and clearly visible on any good map²³). The Bible does not say Sodom and Gomorrah were located anywhere near the southern end of the Dead Sea.

Second, the Bible does say the cities were destroyed by a powerful conflagration that, at least in the air space over the impact area, descended upon them from above. The biblical record does not say all evidence of their existence was wiped from the face of the earth so that the same locale would never be inhabited again.

Third, the biblical text does say the pervasive fire was so comprehensive over the target area that no human beings in the region could have survived the blast. The Bible does not say the fire was so hot that it entirely consumed bodies, buildings, and personal belongings.

Fourth, the Bible does say the new growth (such as sprouts, shoots, and buds) of the vegetation in the region was burned. The biblical account does not say the entire floral assemblage of the area was obliterated so that it could not at least recover somewhat through the course of time.²⁴

²³ See my discussion in Collins, "Geography."

²⁴ Indeed, if the lands and cities of a people are "a wasteland forever," that does not mean that new and different peoples cannot come afterward and live in the same, once-destroyed land.

Fifth, the biblical story does say that all the inhabitants of the Cities of the Plain were killed. The Bible does not say the area became permanently uninhabitable.²⁵ From the biblical story, we can conclude that the region of the Kikkar and the Cities of the Plain which prospered upon it were violently destroyed in an instant of time by an awesome, fiery display of God's wrath.

Some would argue against the point I am making here by citing the five biblical passages which, on the surface, seem to suggest that the plain (*kikkar*) destroyed by the wrath of God became a locale where virtually nothing would grow and was eliminated for all time as a place of habitation.

1. The first passage is Deuteronomy 29:23: "The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur—nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which Yahweh overthrew in fierce anger." All this text says is that God's judgment against a disobedient Israel will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day it was destroyed.
2. The second passage is Isaiah 13:19-20: "Babylon...will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations..." The simile here necessarily applies only to the overthrow of Babylon.
3. The third passage is Jeremiah 49:18: "As Sodom and Gomorrah were overthrown...so no one will live there; no man will dwell in [Edom]." The comparison is to what Sodom and Gomorrah were like at the time they were destroyed, not to the condition of the land in the long term.
4. The fourth passage is Jeremiah 50:40: "As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah...so no one will live there; no man will dwell in [Babylon]." Again, the same simile is here applied to Babylon, still as a symbol of destruction, not necessarily in every aspect. The final passage is Zephaniah 2:9: "...Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah—a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever." When dealing with similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech, one must be very careful to ascertain their character, which is often hyperbolic. In this passage it states that the lands of Moab and Ammon will become "a wasteland forever," yet in the very next sentence it states that "the survivors of my nation will inherit their land." But if the land is "a wasteland forever," how can it be reoccupied and lived in by God's people, Israel? The literary reality is that when the symbolic analogy of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is used to depict the wrath of God against other nations, the meaning is clearly confined to fact of destruction and does not extend to the manner of destruction or to the duration of the resultant damage.

From this we can reasonably argue that the event also constituted an ecological disaster of significant proportions. As a result, the region may have been practically uninhabitable for a considerable period of time, possibly hundreds of years, at least in terms of a concentrated urban

²⁵ In fact, the *kikkar* is one and the same as the Plains of Moab upon which Moses, Joshua, and the Israelites camped for a considerable period of time (probably about two years; Deuteronomy 2:14) before they crossed over to the Jericho side of the Jordan River (Numbers 22:1; 26:3, 63; 31:12; 33:48-50; 35:1; 36:13; Deuteronomy 34:1; Joshua 13:31).

population.²⁶ It is quite allowable, on the basis of the biblical evidence, that the Kikkar area may have recovered eventually to the point where it could once again sustain a substantial population.

²⁶ Throughout the millennia, nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples have lived in and around the region of the Dead Sea with considerable success, primarily because their herds were able to take advantage of the seasonal grasses and plants that carpet the area during and after the brief rainy season. The same is true presently. Much of the *Kikkar* today is still well watered and farmed for a variety of crops.