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Forty Salient Points on the Geography of the Cities of the Kikkar

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Abstract:

This is a simple presentation, in bulletized form, of numerous points relevant in discussing the location of Sodom and the Cities of the Plain in Genesis 10-19. Detailed documentation for each point can be found elsewhere in my writings. What is given here is meant to generate further meaningful discussion and debate on the issue.



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Forty Salient Points on the Geography of the Cities of the Kikkar

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At this juncture, I have been studying the subject of Sodom's location (and related issues) for nearly seven years (see my monograph, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah*, and related papers^{*}). I have analyzed the definitive text on Sodom's location (Gen 13:1-12) in extreme detail. I have investigated the chronological issues with a rigor, I believe, second to none. I have read virtually every piece of literature from every period available on the subject. I have discussed/argued every conceivable point in the discussion with many of the world's leading scholars, both minimalists and maximalists, who are capable of interacting meaningfully on the issues involved. I have personally walked nearly every square meter of the geography and topography for all proposed Sodom sites. I have traversed the ancient trade routes of the region and surveyed every known archaeological site in it and adjacent to it. I have now directed the excavation of the largest Bronze Age site on the eastern Jordan Disk, Tall el-Hammam, into its third season. I have studied the reports of all excavated sites in the area, including the traditional "southern" ones. Perhaps I would even qualify as an expert on the subject of Sodom's location.

By this point in the process, it is safe to say that I have heard every conceivable argument for every Sodom candidate, and have dealt squarely and scientifically with every question and objection raised with regard to the identification of Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom. While I am always open to further discussion, I think it is fair to suggest, to the objective observer, that the weight of the evidence in favor of Tall el-Hammam being Sodom so overwhelms every idea to the contrary that the issue should be laid finally to rest. My experience with contrary propositions and evidence is such that I am historiographically and scientifically compelled to declare them feeble, if not nonsensical, in the factual arena, and of little worth save as artifacts in reconstructing the history of the subject for posterity. Some may disagree with me, but I can see no other options based strictly on the textual, geographical, and archaeological evidence.

The "southern Sodom view" has had its day, but that day is drawing to a close, whether its advocates want to admit it or not (remember, I used to be one!). I do appreciate the scholarship regarding the subject of Sodom's location provided by the many scholars who have dealt with the issue. They did the best they could with the evidence available to them. Based on that (former) paucity of evidence, they (we!) had no choice but to bend and stretch the Sodom story beyond its reasonable contextual limits in order to accommodate sites like Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira. But with the new evidence coming forth in abundance from the eastern Kikkar north of the Dead Sea, we can now allow the Genesis Sodom text to relax back into its normal, natural configuration, without distortion or non sequitur flights of archaeological fantasy.

^{*} S. Collins, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah* (Albuquerque: TSU Press, 2002-2007); see also S. Collins, "The Geography of the Cities of the Plain," *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.1 (2002); S. Collins, "A Chronology for the Cities of the Plain," *BRB* II.8 (2002); S. Collins, "The Architecture of Sodom," *BRB* II.14 (2002). One might also note that our first two seasons of excavation at Tall el-Hammam have revealed what appears to be a continuous occupation from the Chalcolithic Period into the Middle Bronze Age, followed by an occupational hiatus of nearly seven centuries.

For the northern Sodom (Tall el-Hammam), a remarkably high level of correspondence between text and ground continues to manifest itself. The following list is a simple overview of the facts in the broad case. For each of these points, an abundance of documentable facts and evidence can be adduced (see my monograph). As I have developed, reviewed and re-worked this list, I am confident that not a single point rests on speculation, but that all are derived from demonstrable facts arising from the biblical text, geography, chronology, and archaeology. Will everyone jump on board? No. But I am convinced that those who do will find themselves on much, much firmer factual ground than they have experienced with this issue heretofore.

One final little detail that you should consider as you move through this list: Not a single "southern Sodom advocate" has ever provided a detailed analysis of Genesis 13:1-12 in support of that position. Never. The reason? It is simple: Genesis 13:1-12 is the plague that drains the life from the southern view. It always has been. It always will be.

POINTS IN ASCERTAINING THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CITIES OF THE JORDAN DISK (Gen 13:1-12)

1. Story tellers and writers in the ancient Near East did not invent fictitious geographies, but used what was known from personal experience, shared (cultural) experience, or "traditional" geographical wisdom, i.e., actual geography, whether phenomenological or formulaic.
2. Whether or not ancient stories—together with their characters—are factual or fictitious, they were "layered over" real-world geography and topography, whether phenomenological or formulaic.
3. The writer of the Sodom tales (the so-called "Yahwist") likely had personal knowledge of the geography he utilized; perhaps intimate awareness based on experience.
4. Genesis 13:1-12 is the only narrative passage among the Sodom tales marking out the location of the Cities of the Plain by employing geographical data points and directions in a conscience attempt to place them in a real-world context shared by the readers.
5. The Genesis passage in question contains both specific and approximate geographical quantities: (a) Egypt; (b) the Negev; (c) Bethel/Ai; (d) the place of the altar to Yahweh (hill between Bethel and Ai, Gen 12:8); and (e) the *kikkar* (Heb.) of the Jordan.
6. Outside the Old Testament, among the Semitic cognates and Egyptian, *kikkar/kakkar/kakkaru/kerker* is never used as a geographical referent, but means only a "talent, a flat, circular weight of metal" or "circular, flat loaf of bread"; in Egyptian there is also the meaning "to draw a circle in the sand with a stick."
7. *kikkar* (disk, circle) in OT Hebrew likewise refers (well over 50 times) to a talent of metal or a circular, flat loaf of bread; but these meanings never use the definite article, suggesting its general substantive, non-locative quality in such contexts.
8. The thirteen rare geographical uses of *kikkar*, found exclusively in the OT, ten of which are in the Sodom tales, denote the disk-shaped southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea (linguistically a phenomenological secondary referent—i.e., from all angles the area looks like a disk, thus its name); of these thirteen instances four are constructed *kikkar hayarden* (disk of the Jordan, with the definite article), while the remaining nine are *hakikkar* (the Kikkar, with the definite article), suggesting a well-known geographical area (on a par with *the* Negev). There are many standard Hebrew terms (primary referents) for "plain" and "valley," but these are explicitly

avoided when referring to the geographical region known to the Yahwist as *the Kikkar* and *Kikkar of the Jordan*.

9. The *kikkar* of the Jordan is confined to the area north of the Dead Sea because (a) *hayarden* (the Jordan) never refers to anything other than the fresh water system of the Jordan River proper and the valley through which it flows; and (b) *hayarden* is never extended to include any part of the Valley of Siddim (Valley of the Dead Sea), but ends at “the mouth of the Jordan below Pisgah” (another known geographical quantity, easily documentable; cf. Num 34:12; Deut 3:17, 27; 4:47-49; Josh 15:5; 18:19).

10. Thus, the *kikkar* of the Jordan can only refer to the disk-shaped alluvial plain north of the Dead Sea which was well-watered (a) like the garden of Yahweh (streams, rivers, springs), and (b) like Egypt (annual river inundations depositing new layers of water-laden silt; indeed, hydrologically speaking, the Jordan is a “Nile in miniature”).

11. The western Jordan Disk, the location of Jericho and little else, has reasonable perennial water resources plus the Jordan River and local wadis; the eastern Jordan Disk has far greater water resources than the western side, and sports numerous Bronze and Iron Age cities and towns, mainly along its eastern edge, just beyond the reach of the flood plain.

12. The text suggests that Lot viewed with his “unaided” physical eyes the entire Jordan Disk from the area east of Bethel/Ai (above and W/NW of Jericho); the entire *kikkar* is, in fact, visible from the highland’s edge east of Bethel/Ai (which I have personally viewed on many occasions).

13. Lot traveled eastward from Bethel/Ai, pitching his tent toward Sodom, one of the cities of the eastern Jordan Disk, while Abram remained “in Canaan”; i.e., Lot went east of the Jordan River beyond the formulaic Canaan boundary, remaining north of the Dead Sea all the while, no doubt traveling along the convenient E/W trade route that passed near Jericho, then crossed the river to the cities on the far side of the alluvial plain—the Cities of the Kikkar.

14. Sodom was one of the Cities of the Plain (*kikkar* = disk). No city south of the mouth of *hayarden* would have been considered as belonging to the Jordan Disk or the cities thereof (see Point 9 above). Any placement of Sodom (or any of the other Kikkar cities) south of the mouth of the Jordan would force an unnatural meaning on the term *kikkar* that it simply will not bear.

15. As the Yahwist mentally works his way through the geography of the passage, the Cities of the Kikkar are perceived to have existed on the eastern Jordan Disk, north of the Dead Sea, the formulaic order of which (Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim), with its two doublets, is reminiscent of ancient “map lists,” particularly those of ancient Egypt, indicating directionality (usually south-to-north for Transjordan routes).

16. The story teller calculated or assumed that Sodom was the largest urban center on the eastern Jordan Disk as indicated by the fact that (a) it is the only Kikkar city mentioned by itself; (b) it is always listed first when related cities are mentioned; and (c) the king of Sodom is the sole “spokesperson” for the Kikkar cities coalition after the Kedorlaomer incident (Gen 14:17-24).

17. The story of Abram and Lot, minimally, has roots in the Bronze Age (as viewed by most scholars) or, perhaps, in the early Iron Age (as suggested by some—a view in the extreme minority).

18. Biblical dating places Abram, Lot, and the Sodom tales—indeed, all the Genesis patriarchal narratives—squarely in the Middle Bronze Age, probably MB II (an era of famines in Canaan

when hordes of Semitic peoples migrated from the Levant to Lower Egypt; cf. Gen 12:10; 26:1; 41:57ff).

19. Given a Middle Bronze Age date for Abram, Genesis 10 pushes the existence of the Cities of the Plain back well before the time of Abram, probably into the Early Bronze Age.

20. Sodom and the other Cities of the Jordan Disk would, thus, have occupations dating from the EBA into the MBA.

21. In Genesis 10, the mention of actual, known cities— such as Babylon, Erech (Uruk), Akkad, Nineveh, Sidon, Gerar, Gaza—and regions—such as Shinar, Assyria, Mizraim (Egypt), Caphtor—strongly suggests that Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, in the same context, were also real cities in the true geographical sense.

22. Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim were known by the writer of Genesis 10 to mark the eastern extent of the Canaanite clans (Gen 10:18-19), at the geographical and occupational "seat" of the Great Rift Valley, the best and most obvious natural boundary imaginable—real cities representing a real boundary.

23. The city of Sodom itself was fortified (Gen 19:1).

24. Given a MBA date for Abram, archaeologically and geographically speaking, the largest fortified Bronze Age urban center on the eastern Jordan Disk would be a "most likely" candidate for biblical Sodom.

25. The presence of major EBA, Intermediate Bronze Age, and MBA occupations at the "Sodom" urban center would make such a theory compelling.

26. An occupational hiatus of several centuries after a fiery MBA destruction would make that "Sodom" identification almost irresistible (in the time of Moses and Joshua the eastern Jordan Disk is called "the wasteland" below Pisgah—Num 21:20).

27. The presence of three or four nearby sites reflecting the "doublet" geographical configuration suggested in the text, and with the same occupational profile, would make the theory virtually irrefutable.

28. Given a MBA date for Abram, Tall el-Hammam satisfies every "Sodom" criterion embedded in Genesis 13:1-12 (Points 20, 23-27).

29. Given virtually any other "date" for Abram, and if one assumes that the Sodom tales are etiological legends, the Bronze Age ruins of the eastern Jordan Disk would have provided geographical realism to the Yahwist's narrative.

30. Southern Dead Sea sites, such as Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, satisfy not a single "Cities of the Plain" criterion set forth in the Genesis 13 narrative (summarized in Points 20, 23-27 above) because (a) they were destroyed at the end of the EBA centuries before the time of Abram and Lot (given a Middle Bronze Age date for Abram); and (b) they are entirely in the wrong place (whether or not the tales are factual or etiological, and regardless of date!).

31. There are no archaeological sites with an EBA/MBA occupational profile in the Dead Sea Valley south of the mouth of the Jordan River. Period (this is as one might expect from the biblical chronology itself).

32. Whether or not the Yahwist's Sodom tales are fact or fancy, his urban landscape of the Kikkar cities is real, and well-known to his readers.
33. Significant EBA through MBA ruins would have been readily visible on the eastern Jordan Disk in antiquity, even after several of them were topped by smaller city/town occupations during Iron II (this is a reality at several eastern Jordan Disk sites including Tall el-Hammam and Tall Nimrin).
34. The Yahwist penned his stories about the cities of the Jordan *kikkar* while ruins, more ancient still, dotted the eastern Jordan Disk, readily visible and well known to anyone living in or near that region (whether he wrote during the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age!).
35. Had the author of Genesis 13:1-12 thought that southern Dead Sea sites like Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were Sodom and Gomorrah, his clearly-written geography would have been constructed to incorporate the specificity of that location; it does not, by any stretch of the imagination.
36. The Sodom narrative carefully marks out a location for the cities of the Kikkar north of the Dead Sea on the east bank of the Jordan River where, in fact, the ruins of significant Bronze and Iron Age cities exist. Such a high degree of correspondence between text and ground cannot be mere coincidence.
37. Given the extremely high degree of correspondence between the material evidence on the eastern Jordan Disk and a "literal" biblical chronology placing Abram in the Middle Bronze Age, one must ask whether or not such correspondence is actual or coincidental.
38. For the sake of argument, one is forced to admit that a "face-value" reading of the biblical text places the Patriarchal Period in the Middle Bronze Age, whereupon a remarkable level of correspondence exists between the Sodom tales and the material facts present on the eastern Jordan Disk; regardless of when the stories were codified—LBA, IA I, or IA II.
39. If one assumes, for the sake of argument, that the Patriarchal Period either occurred much later—say, during the Late Bronze Age or early Iron Age—or such stories were predominantly works of pious fiction—say, 7th century BCE or later—then there is no historical correspondence between said narratives and the Kikkar's archaeological record, compelling one to conclude that the Sodom tales are probably etiological in nature, but rising from the existence of multiple Bronze Age ruins on the eastern Jordan Disk.
40. Given the fact that the Yahwist's geography unequivocally places the Cities of the Kikkar north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River, one must conclude that, whether the Sodom tales are authentically MBA in origin and date, or are late IA etiological compositions, they are layered over the physical geography of the eastern Jordan Disk where multiple Bronze Age ruins provided his readers with eloquent physical testimony of the destruction of a bygone civilization.

A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON BETWEEN BAB EDH-DHRA AND TALL EL-HAMMAM SET AGAINST THE GEOGRAPHICAL DATA EMBEDDED IN GENESIS 13:1-12

When Bab edh-Dhra and Tall el-Hammam are compared side by side against the geographical scenario presented in Genesis 13:1-12, the results are revealing. Most of the points below are stated explicitly in the text, others are reasonable assumptions implicit from the text. (For

example, one would assume that when Lot traveled eastward toward Sodom he did so along an established ancient roadway.)

<u>Geographical Criterion</u>	<u>Bab edh-Dhra</u>	<u>Tall el-Hammam</u>
located on the Kikkar of the Jordan (River)	No	Yes
located on the Kikkar which is entirely visible from the area of Bethel/Ai	No	Yes
generally visible from the area of Bethel/Ai	No	Yes
in an area watered like the garden of Yahweh (rivers, streams, springs)	Maybe	Yes
in an area of <i>hayarden</i> watered like Egypt (annual delta inundation)	No	Yes
in the lands east of the Canaan boundary	Yes	Yes
accessed by traveling eastward from Bethel/Ai	No	Yes
likely located on a major east/west trade route	No	Yes
located on the farthest edge of the Jordan Disk (perhaps the easternmost of the Kikkar cities)	No	Yes

A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON BETWEEN BAB EDH-DHRA AND TALL EL-HAMMAM SET AGAINST OTHER RELEVANT BIBLICAL DATA

The following are explicitly or implicitly contained in the text of Genesis chapters 10 through 19. Again, a side-by-side comparison between Bab edh-Dhra and Tall el-Hammam is instructive. (Please note that the biblical text itself identifies Hazazon Tamar as En Gedi in 2 Chron 20:2.)

<u>Criterion</u>	<u>Bab edh-Dhra</u>	<u>Tall el-Hammam</u>
likely located on a major north/south trade route	Yes	Yes
next on the map of Kedorlaomer's march from Hazazon Tamar (En Gedi) northward up the Jordan Valley toward Laish/Dan	No	Yes
access to Valley of Siddim military engagement against Kedorlaomer near En Gedi	No/Maybe	Yes
close proximity to Jerusalem	Doubtful	Yes
north of Zoar (likely) (identified as the southern border marker of the Reuben tribal allotment, north of Moabite territory)	No	Yes
founded in the Early Bronze Age	Yes	Yes
occupied during the Intermediate Bronze Age	No	Yes

(continuation of occupation likely)

occupied during the Middle Bronze Age (continuation of occupation during Abram's time)	No	Yes
destroyed during the Middle Bronze Age (the biblical timeframe for Abram and Lot)	No	Yes
unoccupied for centuries after MBA destruction	No	Yes
located in close proximity with at least three or four other sites with the EBA/MBA/gap profile	No	Yes
largest of all Kikkar cities grouped in two doublets (doublets: Sodom/Gomorrah; Admah/Zeboiim)	No	Yes
the southernmost and largest Kikkar city during the MBA, in a doublet string following south-to- north in a typical (Egyptian) Transjordan formula	No	Yes
fortified	Yes	Yes
fortified during the time of Abram with typical MBA earthen rampart defensive system	No	Yes
evidence of fiery destruction	Yes	Yes
evidence of fiery destruction during the MBA	No	Yes
smoke from destruction visible from the area near Hebron (both sites are equidistant from this location)	Yes	Yes

A WORD TO THE WISE

What I've given above is just the tip of the iceberg. But these lists suggest a pattern that, at the very least, ought to cause scholars to look more closely at how they have approached the subject of Sodom's location. I have arrived at my viewpoint on the issue of Sodom's location purely on the basis of facts, logic, and reason. As I continue to flesh out these points with more and more evidence, I urge those with the ability to think geographically, chronologically, and archaeologically—all at the same time!—to put aside their preconceived ideas and go where the evidence leads. As an empirical factualist, that is all I have done in this pursuit. I have said it before, and I will say it again now: If anyone has a better candidate for *biblical* Sodom than Tall el-Hammam, then let's have a look at it!