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## A Response to Bryant G. Wood's Critique of Collins' Northern Sodom Theory

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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 B. G. Wood. 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 attempted a detailed critique of my northern theory in print, until now. In my opinion, the fatal weaknesses inherent in Wood's criticisms of my position reveal the untenable nature of the southern Sodom hypothesis.



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# A Response to Bryant G. Wood's Critique of Collins' Northern Sodom Theory

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In the spring of 2007 I was asked by officials of the Associates for Biblical Research to write a popular-style, lay-oriented article for the Summer 2007 edition of their *Bible and Spade* magazine. The article appears in that issue under the title "Sodom: The Discovery of a Lost City."<sup>1</sup> While the article was in the editing process, I was informed that ABR archaeologist, Bryant G. Wood, would provide a response article critiquing my northern Sodom position. Of course, I welcomed it, but suggested that I also be given some space in the same issue to provide at least a brief response to his critique. That seemed like the fair and balanced thing to do, given the fact that my article was a "pop" piece, and Wood's response was likely to be written with a scholarly tone (which it was).<sup>2</sup> But such was not to be the case. It is my hope that the present article will help to correct this imbalance.<sup>3</sup>

My challenge to the archaeological and biblical studies communities over the past five years has been this: Provide support for the "southern Sodom" hypothesis based on the definitive geographical passage, Genesis 13:1-12; in addition, provide a step-by-step refutation (if possible) of my detailed arguments in favor of a Sodom location north of the Dead Sea on the east side of the Jordan River; further, provide a reasonable rationale for identifying Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah. Up until Wood's response to my article in *Bible and Spade*, no one has attempted to answer my challenge—and for good reason, as will become apparent in the present article. Up to this point, I have interacted with a significant number of leading scholars possessing both archaeological and geographical expertise in the Levantine sphere, and not one of them has been able to mount a substantive counter argument against the "northern Sodom" view. In fact, most have freely admitted that the northern view, as I have presented it, is superior to the southern view in most respects—all this coming from scholars who have previously bowed to the southern hypothesis, mostly for lack of a better alternative.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Collins "Sodom: The Discovery of a Lost City," *Bible and Spade* 23.3 (2007) 70-77.

<sup>2</sup> B. G. Wood, "Locating Sodom: A Critique of the Northern Proposal," *Bible and Spade* 23.3 (2007) 78-84.

<sup>3</sup> For my research on this subject see 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); S. Collins, "Terms of Destruction for the Cities of the Plain," *BRB* II.16 (2002); S. Collins, "Explorations on the Eastern Jordan Disk," *BRB* II.18 (2002); S. Collins, "Forty Salient Points on the Geography of the Cities of the Kikkar," *BRB* VII.1 (2007); S. Collins, "Reassessing the Term *hakikkar* in Nehemiah as Bearing on the Location of the Cities of the Plain," *BRB* VII.3 (2007); S. Collins, "If You Thought You Knew the Location of Sodom and Gomorrah...Think Again," *BRB* VII.4 (2007); see also W. M. Thomson, "A Late Nineteenth-Century Missionary-Scholar's Position on the Location of Sodom and Gomorrah: Excerpts from *The Land and the Book*," *BRB* V.5 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> I will include information from several of these discussions in this article, for the first time.

I will say that Wood has provided the best possible defense for the southern Sodom position in his response to me in *Bible and Spade*. For southern Sodom advocates, it does not get any better than this. Wood is a fine scholar,<sup>5</sup> and he deserves to be heard on the subject (I suggest a careful reading of Wood's material on the location of Sodom.<sup>6</sup> However, as I will demonstrate in response to his critique of my position, even excellent scholars are capable of "seeing what they want to see" and "hearing what they want to hear" when trying to defend long-held positions that are in serious trouble on the basis of better evidence and more rigorous research—and the southern Sodom position is in serious trouble, to put it mildly. All in all, Wood's valiant defense of the southern view is fraught with difficulties. In what follows, I will examine Wood's critique of the northern Sodom theory and show unequivocally to the objective reader that the only place a southern Sodom really exists is in the imaginations of scholars who have somehow managed to ignore the geographical specificities of Genesis 13 in convincing themselves that the "Albrightian myth of a southern Sodom" is gospel.

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<sup>5</sup> I excavated under Dr. Wood's direction for six years at Khirbet el-Maqatir, the likely site of the fortress of Ai destroyed by Joshua. I do agree with his conclusions on that issue. However, in locating Sodom, I think he has departed from the rigorous textual analysis he used in locating Ai. Not a few scholars have recognized this. For example, P. Briggs, who has written the most comprehensive work supporting Wood's identification of Khirbet el-Maqatir as Joshua's Ai [P. Briggs, "Testing the Factuality of the Conquest of Ai Narrative in the Book of Joshua," *BRB* VII.5 (2007); see also P. Briggs, *Testing the Factuality of the Conquest of Ai Narrative in the Book of Joshua* (doctoral dissertation, Newburgh: Trinity Theological Seminary, 2001)], is fully convinced that Tall el-Hammam is biblical Sodom, and that the southern Sodom theory is in error. I have had numerous discussions with Dr. Briggs on this issue.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Wood's 2007 article "Locating Sodom," see B. G. Wood, "Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?" *BS* 3 (1974) 65-89; B. G. Wood, "Sodom and Gomorrah Update," *BS* 6 (1977) 24-30; B. G. Wood, "Sodom and Gomorrah Update," *BS* 12 (1983) 22-33; and B. G. Wood, "The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah," *BS* 12.3 (1999) 67-80. For additional scholarly approaches to the subject of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Cities of the Plain, and related subjects, see such general works as the latest editions of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, and *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. For detailed scholarly treatments of the subject see works such as: W.F. Albright, "The Archaeological Results of an Expedition to Moab and the Dead Sea," *BASOR* 14 (1924) 2-12; E. Power, "The Site of the Pentapolis," *Bib* 11 (1930) 23-62, 149-182; F. G. Clapp, "The Site of Sodom and Gomorrah," *AJA* 40 (1936) 323-344; J. P. Harland, "Sodom and Gomorrah," *BA* 5 (1942) 17-32; J.P. Harland, "Sodom and Gomorrah," *BA* 6 (1943) 41-54; H. Shanks, "Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?" *BAR* 6.5 (1980) 26-36; W. C. van Hattem, "Once Again: Sodom and Gomorrah," *BA* 44 (1981) 87-92; D. M. Howard, Jr., "Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited," *JETS* 27 (1984) 385-400; G. M. Harris and A. P. Beardow, "The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: A Geotechnical Perspective," *QJEG* 28 (1995) 349-362; and D. Neev and K. O. Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jericho: Geological, Climatological, and Archaeological Background* (New York: Oxford University, 1995). See also W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra and the Origin of the Sodom Saga," in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Memory of D. G. Rose*, ed. by L. G. Perdue, L. E. Toombs, G. L. Johnson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987); W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra'" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. by D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1993); and M. C. Astour, "Zoar" in *ABD*. Perhaps the best recent geographical work on the Transjordan, holding a "split view" on the location of the Cities of the Plain, is B. MacDonald, *East of the Jordan: Territories and Sites of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Boston: ASOR, 2000) 45-61. The aforementioned scholars have made serious attempts to solve the puzzle of the location of the Cities of the Plain, although I think their analysis of the biblical text generally exhibits a serious lack of hermeneutical precision. There have also been attempts to identify a southern Dead Sea Sodom and Gomorrah that border on the ridiculous, such as the pseudo-archaeology of R. Wyatt, R. Cornuke, and a handful of others.

In other contexts, Wood has accused some members of the archaeology community of being less than rigorous and honest in their dismissals of biblical historicity.<sup>7</sup> And I think he is correct. Indeed, our disagreement over the location of Sodom and Gomorrah is not at all about the historical accuracy of the biblical text. For good and scientific reasons we both hold to a high view of the Bible's historical fidelity. The issue of Sodom's location is, first and foremost, a hermeneutical one. What does the biblical text actually say about it? Second, finding the true location of the Cities of the Plain involves comparing archaeological data with biblical data, including chronology, and looking for reasonable points of correspondence. In the final analysis, the best theory will be the one that requires the least number of secondary and tertiary (ancillary) hypotheses in order to support it. The correct theory should account for the most data, both biblically and archaeologically, in a straightforward manner, without having to rely on unusual interpretations of, or to explain away, archaeological or biblical facts.

In the pages that follow, on the one hand, I will demonstrate that the southern Sodom theory (hereafter SST) is bereft of factual support and carries with it a burdensome load of dismissive explanations and abnormal representations of both the Bible and the relevant archaeological data. On the other hand, I will show that the northern Sodom theory (hereafter NST) preserves both the natural (intended) meaning of the biblical text, plus a straightforward interpretation of the archaeological data. At the end of each major section, I have provided a specific recounting of the "state" of each theory in terms of the kinds of ancillary hypotheses required to prop it up. Occam's Razor<sup>8</sup> will tell the true tale of our infamous cities.

For convenience, I will use Wood's own headings and categories as they appear in his article. This will allow the reader to track through his logic. If Wood's arguments are the best possible in favor of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira being Sodom and Gomorrah (and I think they are), then perhaps the following presentation of facts and evidence will prove to be the undoing of the SST. As E. H. Cline recently admitted in his chapter on Sodom and Gomorrah, after assessing the current state of the "southern" evidence:

[There] is no longer any particular reason to insist that Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira are definitely Sodom and Gomorrah, especially if we wish to have Abraham both as an eyewitness and living in the Middle Bronze Age....Perhaps it would be wise to untether Sodom and Gomorrah from Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira and search elsewhere for them. But where? Steven Collins, a professor at Trinity Southwest University's College of Archaeology, rejects the identification of Sodom and Gomorrah with Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira and suggests instead that biblical Sodom is located at a site named Tall el-Hammam in Jordan, which he is currently excavating....Thus, the location, and indeed the very existence, of Sodom and Gomorrah remains a mystery. It may be that a team of archaeologists, such as the one led by Collins, will definitively locate the cities. Until then, we can only speculate on the additional hypotheses that will be suggested in the meantime.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> B. G. Wood, "Let the Evidence Speak," *BAR* (2007) 26.

<sup>8</sup> Occam's razor is "a scientific and philosophic rule that entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily which is interpreted as requiring that the simplest of competing theories be preferred to the more complex or that explanation of unknown phenomena be sought first in terms of known quantities" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*).

<sup>9</sup> E. H. Cline, *From Eden to Exile* (Washington DC: National Geographic, 2007) 59-60.

Indeed. (I will return to some of Cline’s observations on the subject later in this article.) But we are presently in Cline’s “meantime,” and every scholar, on the basis of the evidence, ought to admit—at the very least!—that the evidence for the SST is not nearly as good as the proverbial “they” have said it was. So now, allow me to examine Wood’s SST in detail to see if it can withstand a critical assessment. [Note: I have not included Wood’s references or notes in my quotations from his critique; please see his original article for that information.]

## GEOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE FOR LOCATING SODOM

Wood launches his attempted refutation of the NST by noting that

Collins begins by stating, “Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim almost never appear on Bible maps.” This statement is quite inaccurate. In reviewing eight Bible atlases published since 1997 that cover the period of the Patriarchs, seven locate the Cities of the Plain south of the Dead Sea. The eighth offers no suggestion as to their location.<sup>10</sup>

This tack by Wood reveals the very reason that it was unfair and imbalanced for *Bible and Spade* to place his scholarly article against my lay-oriented treatment of the subject. Many may read this and think that Wood has caught me being “inaccurate,” but the fact is that my statement is perfectly accurate, and based on a large number of lectures<sup>11</sup> where I have asked the following question to tens of thousands of Bible-carrying people: “Does anyone have a map in his or her Bible that includes Sodom and Gomorrah?” Only one person has ever said Yes, and then he qualified it by saying, “But it has a question mark next to it.” Note that I did not say, “...never appear in Bible atlases.” I clearly said, “...almost never appear on Bible maps.” (Most people do not carry Bible atlases to church!)

But, in fact, most Bible atlases do not include Sodom and Gomorrah on maps depicting known sites of the Patriarchal Period, and if they do, they appear with question marks, or are by some means classified as unidentified. Some of them may talk about a possible location for the Cities of the Plain, but most still do not place them on a map as identified sites. The most scholarly Bible atlas published recently is *The Sacred Bridge*, edited by A. F. Rainey and R. S. Notley<sup>12</sup> (noted by Wood), but it does not present Sodom and Gomorrah as identified sites on any of its maps of the Patriarchal Period. They are merely placed in a box, designating speculation, and on two different maps they float from one side of the Dead Sea to the other (generally in the traditional southern Dead Sea region), but never are they set in the area of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira. (One might be interested to know that in my recent interactions with Professor Rainey regarding the location of Sodom, he tended to agree more with the northern view as I have argued it.<sup>13</sup>)

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<sup>10</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 78.

<sup>11</sup> Attendance at such lectures, often in churches with most people carrying Bibles, has exceeded several thousand on more than one occasion. At one point I polled about 15,000 people in a single Sunday.

<sup>12</sup> A. F. Rainey and R. S. Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta’s Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> In recent conversations with A. Rainey regarding the location of the “plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan” on which the Cities of the Plain, including Sodom and Gomorrah, were located, he stated that “Your arguments about the Kikkar are the most cogent...The map in the Atlas [*The Sacred Bridge*] does need revision. I should have tagged it like the Shishak map, “highly conjectural.” Gen 13 has to do with the high ground east of Bethel. As I said earlier, the references to the *kikkar* fit better with the area N. of the Dead Sea...As a sideline, it is usually ignored that the term

But just for the record, here are a few more to add to the list.<sup>14</sup> The *Standard Bible Atlas* (2006) does not place Sodom and Gomorrah on any of its maps; neither does the *Moody Atlas of the Bible* (1985), the *Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps and Timelines* (2005), the *Tubingen Bible Atlas* (2001), nor the *Holy Land Satellite Atlas* (2 vols.; 1999). The *IVP Atlas of Bible History* (2006) has Sodom and Gomorrah on a map, but with a question mark (and not in the location of Bab edh-Dhra, Wood's Sodom), as does *The HarperCollins Concise Atlas of the Bible* (2006). The *New Bible Atlas* (1994) has them on a small map suggestive of Kedorlaomer's campaign (Gen 14), but not on its larger map of "known sites" of the Patriarchal Period. The *Holman Bible Atlas* (1998) lists Sodom and Gomorrah with the qualifier "possible location," but not in the area of Bab edh-Dhra. The old classic *Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible* (1956-74), compiled by none other than W. F. Albright and G. E. Wright, puts Sodom and Gomorrah under the waters at the southern end of the Dead Sea, but not at Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, because Albright knew those southern Dead Sea sites were abandoned long before the time of Abram and Lot.

So, as far as Bible atlases are concerned, we can safely say that while some include them and some do not, not a single one locates Sodom and Gomorrah with any degree of confidence, and most atlases that do list them (always indicated as speculative) do not place them in the area of Bab edh-Dhra, as Wood theorizes. In my mind, the map issue simply reinforces that fact that the location of Sodom remains an unknown quantity for the vast majority of scholars.

### ***Biblical References***

Wood continues his geographical discussion by stating that "An analysis of geographical indicators in Scripture places Sodom and the Cities of the Plain south of the Dead Sea." He then proceeds to ignore the only *definitive* biblical text on the geography of the Cities of the Plain: Genesis 13:1-12. He even goes so far as to minimize the importance of that pivotal passage by quoting W. Rast:

Regarding the use of Genesis 13 to locate Sodom, Walter Rast, one of the excavators of Bab edh-Dhra, summarized the situation well: "One can safely say that the directions and locations in Genesis 13 are the most general and obscure of all the texts about Sodom. It is surprising that some scholars could put so much weight on the indistinct locations given there [for a northern location], while rejecting the more compelling references in other texts [for a southern location]."<sup>15</sup>

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"arabah" applies to the Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea (2 Sam 4, about the assassins of Ish-baal). Too bad the author there did not use the term *kikkar*."

<sup>14</sup> B. J. Beitzel, ed., *Moody Atlas of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985); T. V. Brisco, ed., *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Holman, 1998); R. Cleave, ed., *Holy Land Satellite Atlas* vols 1, 2 (Nicosia, Cyprus: Rohr Productions, 1999); P. L. Lawrence, ed., *IVP Atlas of Bible History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006); S. Mittmann and G. Schmitt, eds., *Tubingen Bible Atlas* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001); *New Bible Atlas* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity/Lion, 1004; J. B. Pritchard, ed., *HarperCollins Concise Atlas of the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006); *Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps and Timelines* (Torrence, CA: Rose Publishing, 2005); *Standard Bible Atlas* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Wood, "Locating Sodom" 81.

Several things about Rast's views are relevant to this discussion.<sup>16</sup> First, Rast himself never provided a detailed exegesis of Genesis 13 (neither has Wood, nor any SST advocate).<sup>17</sup> Second, Rast did excavate at Bab edh-Dhra, and always wanted to connect it to Sodom in the worst way (in spite of the biblical and archaeological evidence). Third, Rast did not believe in the historicity of Abraham and Lot, nor in the literal story of the divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; thus, he could never be accused of taking the biblical text seriously enough to perform an adequate hermeneutical inquiry as to the geography of Sodom (which he never did). Fourth, Rast believed that the biblical story of Sodom was an etiological legend that the Israelites likely picked up from local Canaanite lore, later spliced into the patriarchal narratives of Genesis by a Judahite priest during the late Iron Age. Fifth, Rast was convinced that the Sodom legends were distilled from ancient "collective" memories of the destruction/abandonment of Early Bronze Age cities (ca. 2350 BCE) throughout the Levant, including Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira; thus, according to Rast, while the Sodom saga had a local (Canaanite) origin at Bab edh-Dhra, he knew that the phenomenon(a) responsible for the destruction Bab edh-Dhra was also responsible for the demise of virtually every EBA city between the Euphrates River and Egypt.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, the Bab edh-Dhra destruction in 2350 BCE was only one small part of a ubiquitous catastrophe in the Near East that disrupted even the major civilization centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia.<sup>19</sup> This fact alone should cause scholars—who take the Bible at least somewhat seriously—to doubt that the general demise of EBA cities, including Bab edh-Dhra, in any way matches the surgical elimination of the Cities of the Plain described in Genesis. Whatever brought an end to the EBA Levantine civilization was something quite different from what Scripture describes regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. Rast knew this. However, because he did not accept the historical veracity of Genesis anyway, it made sense to him that the general EBA-ending catastrophe may have given rise to the Sodom lore, eventually given local color via the ruins at Bab edh-Dhra as viewed by later Canaanite and Israelite tribesmen.

For Rast to pass over Genesis 13:1-12 in favor of what he calls "more compelling references in other texts" clearly demonstrates his hermeneutical ineptitude in this regard, perhaps driven by his blind acceptance of the SST. In light of this, before I deal with Wood's "biblical" geography of Sodom, I think a brief brush with biblical hermeneutics is in order.<sup>20</sup>

When one speaks of a "definitive" biblical passage regarding an issue, the focus is on any given passage specifically written (or spoken) with the authorial intent to communicate

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<sup>16</sup> See W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra and the Origin of the Sodom Saga" in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Memory of D. G. Rose*, ed. by L. G. Perdue, L. E. Toombs, G. L. Johnson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987); and W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. by D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> See my detailed exegesis of Gen 13:1-12 in S. Collins, "Geography...Cities of the Plain."

<sup>18</sup> A. Ben-Tor, "The Early Bronze Age," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, A. Ben-Tor, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1992) 81-125; G. W. Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 112-157.

<sup>19</sup> N. Grimal, *A History of Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992) 137ff.; D. B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992) 63-64; S. Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia: The Eden that Never Was* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1999) 117-148.

<sup>20</sup> My first doctorate was in the field of biblical hermeneutics, so I know whereof I speak. I still teach biblical hermeneutics and exegesis at the graduate and doctoral levels.

information on said issue.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, secondary (non-definitive) passages must be interpreted in the light of a definitive passage, never the reverse. On the subject of biblical geography, a definitive passage is one that is specifically written to answer a question like “Where did so-and-so go, and by what route did he get there?” These kinds of passages occur when the travels/movements of a person or a group of people are being described, such as the routes the Israelites traveled from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. In these expressly geographical passages, it is often stated that a person/group went “here to there,” then “there to there,” and then “there to there.” These statements are usually geographically sequential and chronologically serial.

Hermeneutically speaking, there is only one section of biblical text written specifically for the purpose of providing, by authorial intent, geographical directions to Sodom and the Cities of the Plain: Genesis 13:1-12. As I will demonstrate momentarily, the only passage that Wood, or any scholar, should be using to locate Sodom is this one. Further, all other passages touching on the “location” of Sodom must, by the most fundamental rules of hermeneutics, be considered ancillary, and interpreted on the basis of Genesis 13:1-12, the primary geographical passage on the subject. Any other approach leads to an exegetical quagmire, which is exactly what SST advocates have created in their inadequate treatment of the text. That Wood does his best to dismiss Genesis 13:1-12 as less important for the geography of Sodom than other passages is, at best, hermeneutically suspect. That he would use Rast’s opinion of Genesis 13 to support his diminution of the geographical importance of Genesis 13:1-12 ought to send up an exegetical red flag.

Bypassing Genesis 13, as if it is of lesser importance, the first passage Wood turns to is Genesis 10:19:

The southern border of Canaan is described in Genesis 10:19 as passing from Gaza, on the Mediterranean coast, to Gerar, identified as Tel Haror 12.4 mi (20 km) southeast of Gaza, to the Cities of the Plain. Tel Haror lies west of the southern end of the Dead Sea as it existed in Abraham’s time. Tall el-Hammam, on the other hand, lies northeast of the Dead Sea.<sup>22</sup>

While Genesis 13:1-12 was specifically written to take the reader to Sodom, and is therefore primary on that issue, Genesis 10:19 is obviously secondary to that purpose, written only to delineate the extent of the Canaanite territory: “Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha” (Gen 10:18-19). Notwithstanding the fact that the location of Gerar is speculative (it really does not matter) and that the Genesis 10 chronological context precedes the time of Abraham by a good bit, the passage does only one thing: it lays out both the western and eastern extent of the Canaanites. The Rift Valley (including the Jordan and Dead Sea valleys) was, in fact, dominated by a string of substantial cities during the Early Bronze Age, including Tall el-Hammam (north and east of the Dead Sea) which dwarfs Bab edh-Dhra to the south. If both “map lists” were given from north to south (as the western one obviously is), and date from the time before Abram and Lot (likely the Early

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<sup>21</sup> Any good text on biblical hermeneutics will support this fundamental concept. I recommend B. A. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); and B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 78.



Bronze Age), then perhaps Bab edh-Dhra was Lasha. Since Sodom is consistently given the preeminent billing (always first), it would logically be the biggest; and in the entire Rift Valley, that would be Tall el-Hammam, not Bab edh-Dhra. However one slices it, the Genesis 10 passage provides the general Canaanite borders, west and east, and was not written to provide the location of Sodom. Hermeneutically, it would have to be interpreted in the light of Genesis 13, the definitive text for Sodom's geography (I will deal with Gen 13 subsequently, in Wood's order of things).

Next, Wood turns to the Kedorlaomer campaign of Genesis 14 in an attempt to extract at least a smidjeon of support for a southern Sodom:

When the four kings of Mesopotamia fought against the kings of the Cities of the Plain, they "joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (the Salt Sea)" (Gn 14:3), a clear reference to the southern basin of the Dead Sea which had flooded in later times.<sup>23</sup>

This is a classic *non sequitur* from every angle. One question begs asking: What does the location of this battle have to do with a localized placement of Sodom or the other Cities of the Plain? Logically, nothing. (Not to mention the fact that Sodom and Gomorrah were located in the Kikkar of the Jordan River, not the Valley of Siddim, as we shall see.) To be sure, it was an ancient Near Eastern military tradition to engage a larger enemy force as far from one's home city as possible. If the engagement takes place on one's doorstep, then the next step, if one suffers defeat, is the plundering of the home city and perhaps the death of one's family. Not a good proposition. Thus, it was wise to carry the battle to the enemy at as much distance as one could strategically manage. This is exactly what happened in the famous Battle of Megiddo, wherein the great Egyptian warrior-king, Tuthmosis III, defeated a coalition of 119 Canaanite city state kings allied against him.<sup>24</sup> They came from all over Canaan (some from significant distances) to fight against the famous pharaoh. This was typical. That the combined Cities of the Plain forces would attempt to cut off Kedorlaomer's coalition army at some distance from their domestic locale would have been normal, if not obligatory for survival.

Geographically, the battle probably took place just north of En Gedi, about halfway up the western side of the Dead Sea. We know this because after Kedorlaomer came northward out of the desert from Kadesh, he headed straight for the abundant, perennial spring waters of Hazazon Tamar. Hazazon Tamar is none other than En Gedi, as the following Old Testament passage confirms: "Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, 'A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the [Salt] Sea. It is already in Hazazon Tamar' (that is, En Gedi)" (2 Chron 20:2). Obviously, Kedorlaomer was heading northward along the western shore of the Dead Sea in order to capture En Gedi, and use that well-watered location as a staging area to refresh his troops, and to prepare for his onslaught against the Cities of the Plain as his army continued northward through the Jordan Valley toward Dan, Damascus, and their Mesopotamian homeland. Only a northern Sodom fits this scenario.

And another question: if the Salt Sea (Valley of Siddim) has a northern end, a middle (east and west!), and a southern end—which it does—then what justifies Wood's jump from that to "a clear reference to the southern basin of the Dead Sea..."? This is interpretation based not on

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> D. B. Redford, *The Wars in Syria and Palestine of Thutmose III: Culture and History of the Ancient World*, 16 (Boston: Brill, 2003).

textual or geographical facts, but on a presuppositional belief in the SST. Events occurring near tar (slime? slimy mud?) pits in the Valley of Siddim could just as easily be located at the north end of the Dead Sea.<sup>25</sup> The Valley of Siddim is the entire Dead Sea valley, not just a piece of it. Again, proper hermeneutics demands that the geography of the Kedorlaomer incident be set against the geography of Genesis 13, not an imaginary southern Sodom. That both Abram and Bera, king of Sodom, paid a formal visit to the king of Jerusalem, Melchizedek, after Abram returned the war spoils to the Cities of the Plain, is another indicator that Sodom was close to Jerusalem. Indeed, Tall el-Hammam and its associated Middle Bronze Age (time of Abram) sites are right on the main trade route going eastward from Jerusalem into Transjordan. (Not to mention the fact that there were not any southern Dead Sea cities during the time of Abram and Lot—minor details! I will deal with chronology shortly.)

The next geographical “evidence” in Wood’s textual arsenal in Ezekiel 16:46:

When Ezekiel chastised Jerusalem for her wickedness, he said, “Your older sister was Samaria, who lived to the north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you with her daughters, was Sodom (Ez 16: 46).” Samaria is 34 mi (55 km) north of Jerusalem and Bab edh-Dhra, the likely site of Sodom, is 40 mi (64 km) southeast of Jerusalem. Tall el-Hammam, however, is 26 mi (42 km) east-northeast of Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>

One of the first rules of hermeneutics is that poetic, symbolic, metaphorical passages should never be used to delineate historical information.<sup>27</sup> There are several things about this passage that should be noted. First, Hebrew has no words for “north” or “south.” Assuming that one faces the rising sun, the Hebrew term “east” is simply “forward.” The word for “west” is “behind.” Thus, “north” is “left (hand),” and “south” is “right (hand).” Ezekiel may not have the two cardinal directions in mind at all.<sup>28</sup> He may simply be communicating that wicked Jerusalem was accompanied (metaphorically!) by her “sisters” in crime: Samaria at her left hand, and Sodom at her right hand. It is instructive to realize that most scholars translate the same Hebrew words as “left” and “right” in Genesis 13:9 where Abram says to Lot, “If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.”

One must further note that Ezekiel calls Samaria the “older sister,” while Sodom is the “younger sister.” If one wants to get historically technical, then this Scripture passage is all wrong. Both Jerusalem and Sodom were millennia older than Samaria, which was not founded until after the division of the Israelite monarchy.<sup>29</sup> Biblically, Sodom dates to a time well before Abram (Gen 10). Additionally, Sodom did not even exist at the time this passage was written. Thus, historically and geographically, Samaria is not the “older” sister of Jerusalem any more than Sodom is a “southern” sister in any literal sense. The entire passage is metaphorical and

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<sup>25</sup> Neev and Emery, *Destruction of Sodom* 141-143.

<sup>26</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 78.

<sup>27</sup> See references in footnote 21.

<sup>28</sup> Note that in Gen 13:9 Abram says to Lot, “Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.” These are the same Hebrew terms as used in Ezek 16:46.

<sup>29</sup> The city of Samaria was founded during the reign of Omri. See N. Avigad, “Samaria (City),” *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* vol. 4, E. Stern, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 1300-1310.

poetic, and hermeneutically off-limits to geographical researchers. Nonetheless, Wood bases his Sodom/Bab edh-Dhra connection on this “southern sister” interpretation, while simultaneously ignoring that she is also the “younger sister,” which is archaeologically impossible. We should recognize that improper hermeneutics can lead to incorrect geography.

With (misplaced) confidence in the “geographical indicators” of Genesis 10, 14, and Ezekiel 16, Wood forges ahead as if to apply the frosting to his “southern Sodom” cake by introducing the subject of Zoar’s location:

Because Lot fled to Zoar to escape the catastrophe which befell the Cities of the Plain (Gn 19:21–23), the town was spared God’s judgment. From Biblical and extrabiblical references we know that Zoar was occupied from the time of Abraham to the Middle Ages. Both Isaiah (15:5) and Jeremiah (48:34) mention it in their prophecies against Moab (Iron Age). It is further mentioned in various ancient references from the Roman period to the Middle Ages. Both Josephus and Eusebius state that Zoar was south of the Dead Sea, and the famous Madaba Map (sixth century) places Zoar and the Sanctuary of St. Lot south of the Dead Sea. The Sanctuary of St. Lot, actually a monastery and church complex, has been located south of the Dead Sea and excavated. It was built around a natural cave which early Christians believed was the cave Lot and his daughters took refuge in after the destruction of the Cities of the Plain (Gn 19:30).<sup>30</sup>

One might ask: What does the location of Zoar have to do with the location of Sodom and Gomorrah? Has anyone ever thought to ask this question? (I believe I am the only one who has ever posed it seriously.) Other than the probability that it was south of Sodom,<sup>31</sup> the only relevancy in Zoar’s location may be in how far Lot and family could have traveled from Sodom beginning, say, just before sun-up through mid-afternoon, perhaps on donkeys or other beasts of burden, scared to death, and wanting to get as far as they could as fast as possible. Maybe such a calculation could be helpful. Nevertheless, my examination of the issue of Zoar’s location<sup>32</sup> reveals that most Bible scholars, archaeologists, and even biblical geographers, have completely missed the mark on the actual biblical location of Zoar—and they have missed it precisely because they have been influenced by (nearly) blind acceptance of the SST. If the traditional Zoar at the southern end of the Dead Sea is not Zoar at all, but something else, then SST advocates like Wood will have lost probably the strongest argument in their arsenal. This is, in fact, the case, as I have clearly demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>33</sup> and will recap here.

There is nothing in the Sodom narrative of Genesis that would necessarily locate Zoar south of Sodom, or Sodom north of Zoar. If the subject is examined carefully, one soon discovers that the southern Dead Sea Zoar is mostly driven by late, extrabiblical sources (aptly cited by Wood), and not by any biblical references at all. Realistically, does anyone want to base the location of Zoar on the Byzantine Madaba Map? And why would Josephus or Eusebius be reliable regarding the location of a city from the Bronze Age, especially since the traditional Zered River location of Zoar is biblically impossible? (I can cite early Christian writers and traditions that locate

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<sup>30</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 78-79.

<sup>31</sup> Zoar was probably south of Sodom because of the phrase “Egypt, unto Zoar” (Gen 13:10).

<sup>32</sup> S. Collins, “Rethinking the Location of Zoar: An Exercise in Biblical Geography,” *BRB* VI.3 (2006).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Sodom and Zoar north of the Dead Sea,<sup>34</sup> but neither do these mean anything against the actual biblical locations.)

Here are the biblical facts about the location of Zoar: First, it was close enough to Sodom for someone in a hurry to reach in, say, half a day. Second, it was located on the north side of the Arnon Gorge, probably near its confluence with the Dead Sea. How do we know this? It is really quite simple.<sup>35</sup> Here are seven biblical facts leading to the location of Zoar:

1. Yahweh declared that Edom was off limits to the Israelites, because that land was the inheritance of Esau (Deuteronomy 2:4-5).
2. The Wadi Zered (if located at the southern tip of the Dead Sea) was the traditional border between Edom and Moab (see any relevant Bible map).
3. Yahweh declared that Moab was off limits to the Israelites, because that land was the inheritance of Lot (Deuteronomy 2:9).
4. The “Arnon is the [northern] border of Moab” (Num 21:13) (see any relevant Bible map).
5. Moses (at Yahweh’s allowance) gave the tribe of Reuben an allotment of land that included “the circle of the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar” (Deut 34:3; cf. Joshua 13:9-10), the southern border of which was the Arnon Gorge, south of which was the kingdom of Moab (see any relevant Bible map).
6. If the Transjordan tribal allotment of Reuben had a southern border at Zoar, north of Moab (which it did; see any relevant Bible map; cf. Deut 34:3 and Joshua 13:9-10), then Zoar had to be on the northern side of the Arnon Gorge (Wadi Mujib).
7. Zoar cannot have been located on the (traditional Zered) border between Moab and Edom in territory declared off-limits to the Israelites by Yahweh.

The extent of the Reubenite territory is clearly laid out in Joshua 13:9-10 (my translation): “...from Aroer on the rim of the Arnon Gorge, and the town in the middle of the gorge, and [the] whole plateau of Medeba unto Dibon, and all the towns of Sihon, king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon unto [the] border of [the] sons of Ammon...” If in Deuteronomy 34:3 “the Kikkar of the Valley of Jericho...unto Zoar” defines the same Reubenite territory as presented in the Joshua passage above—and I think it does—then Zoar marks the southern border of Reuben, and is possibly identified in Joshua 13:9 as “the town in the middle of the gorge.” Consider this: if Aroer is “on the rim of the Arnon Gorge,” then what is the identity of the other town?

Most scholars agree that Zoar was south of Sodom and the Cities of the Plain, as one traveled in the direction of Egypt. It was probably located on the north/south trade route running along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea (the ancient “winter” road)—but where along that route? Coordinating between the Deuteronomy and Joshua passages quoted above, Zoar could easily be placed on the north/south highway near the confluence of the Arnon River and the Dead Sea, “in

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<sup>34</sup> Egeria, the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE Spanish pilgrim to the Holy Land, says that she could see the “land of the Sodomites” and Zoar from the church at Mount Nebo, looking north of the Dead Sea. See the account “Mount Nebo” in *Diary of a Pilgrimage*, written by the pilgrim nun Egeria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

<sup>35</sup> See Collins, “Rethinking...Zoar.”

the middle of the gorge,” meaning that it was on the northern bank of the river within the territory of Reuben. Everything on the other side of the Arnon River was Moabite territory. This also makes perfect sense of the Isaiah 15:5 and Jeremiah 48:34 passages where Moabites flee to Zoar (outside of their own territory), and their cries are heard in Zoar, north of Moab.

*Biblical Zoar* was in Reubenite territory, north of Moab. To place Zoar on the (traditional) Wadi Zered, as most Bible maps do, is to place it on the border between the Edomite and Moabite kingdoms, both of which were off-limits to the Israelites. This is a simple computation: if Zoar was the southern limit of the Israelite Transjordan allotment (which it was), then it must have been on the north bank of the Arnon River out of Moabite territory, and cannot possibly have been located on the (traditional Zered) border between Moab and Edom within territory specifically forbidden by Yahweh. Additionally, if Zoar was on the Arnon River, then Sodom and the Cities of the Kikkar of the Jordan River must have been farther north, where, in fact, the Kikkar of the Jordan is located (I will demonstrate this shortly).

Since Wood seems to rely heavily on Neev’s and Emery’s book, *The Destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Jericho*, it is worth noting that Neev and Emery do not identify Bab edh-Dhra as Sodom at all, but as Zoar.<sup>36</sup> They also identify the Zered River as a tributary of the Arnon, explaining that Zoar’s appearance on the Madaba Map at the southern tip of the Dead Sea is a common mistake made by people who do not realize that, in Byzantine times, the area of the Dead Sea south of the Lisan had dried up, so that the Zered, and thus Zoar, only *appear* to be at the southern end, when, in fact, they were at the Lisan latitude.<sup>37</sup> Note that there is no Lisan Peninsula on the Madaba Map. Thus, the Madaba Map does not place Zoar at the tip of the Dead Sea’s shallow southern basin, but on a parallel with the southern end of the deep basin north of the Lisan.

### ***Understanding Genesis 13***

And that brings us to Wood’s treatment of Genesis 13:1-12, which he has to discount in order to preserve the SST (he does not include it in his section on “Biblical References”). I will quote him extensively in order to deal with his comments in detail (for an exhaustive treatment of this entire issue, see my previously published articles<sup>38</sup>). Wood states:

Collins’ main evidence for locating Sodom north of the Dead Sea is found in Genesis 13. There we have the account of Lot choosing the Cities of the Plain (*kikkar*) as the area where he would pasture his flocks. Collins interprets the location of the event as “the environs of Bethel/Ai.” Thus, when Lot “set out toward the east” (Gn 13:11), he would have traveled to the area of the southern Jordan Valley just north of the Dead Sea.<sup>39</sup>

This is a fair, although over-simplified, assessment of my views. As I have stated previously, Genesis 13:1-12 is *the* definitive passage on the geography of Sodom and the Cities of the Plain

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<sup>36</sup> Neev and Emery, *Destruction of Sodom* 7, 109, 124, 129-32, 136-138, 150.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>38</sup> Collins, “Geography...Cities of the Plain”; Collins, “Chronology...Cities of the Plain”; Collins, “Explorations...Jordan Disk”; Collins, “Forty Salient Points”; Collins, “Reassessing the Term *hakikkar*”; Collins, “Location of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

<sup>39</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 80.

(*kikkar*). The passage bears quoting at this point (I have removed some of the incidentals, but have included all of the geographical data:

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev...and Lot went with him. From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar....And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot....So Abram said to Lot..., 'Let's part company' ....Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*) was well watered, like the garden of Yahweh, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar....So Lot chose for himself the whole plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*) and set out toward the east....Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain (*hakikkar*) and pitched his tent near Sodom. (Gen 13:1-12)

Verse 13 is a statement about Sodom's wickedness. Then, in verse 14, we read the following: "Yahweh said to Abram after Lot had departed from him, 'Lift up your eyes....'" In other words, everything that happens in the text from this point forward occurred *after* the separation of Abram and Lot. Keep this clearly in mind.

Wood continues:

A careful analysis of the chapter...reveals that [Lot traveling east from the area of Bethel/Ai toward Sodom in the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea] is not necessarily the case. The separation passage, vss. 5–17, is bracketed by references to two important camping places which had religious significance for Abraham. After returning from Egypt, Abraham moved northward until he came to the place between Bethel and Ai where he had previously built an altar. "There Abram called on the name of the Lord" (Gn 13:3–4). Following the separation, "Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord" (Gn 13:18). We are not given the details of the journey from Bethel/Ai to Hebron, except for the account of the separation of Lot. The straight-line distance from Bethel/Ai to Hebron is ca. 27 mi (44 km), and so the journey would have required a number of encampments. Since Abraham would have sought the best pasturage for his animals along the way, it is unlikely that he traveled in a straight line.

Genesis 13 does not specifically state where the separation took place. From the Bethel/Ai area to Tall el-Hammam is ca. 25 mi (40 km), a considerable distance for Lot to observe "that the whole plain of Jordan was well watered" (Gn 13:10). Based on the evidence we have considered, it is more likely that the separation took place in southern Canaan just prior to Abraham settling at Hebron. If their wanderings took them southeast of Hebron, they could have come to a place ca. 15 mi (24 km) east of Bab edh-Dhra where Lot would have been close enough to observe the vegetation of the *kikkar* of the Jordan.<sup>40</sup>

I was quite taken aback when I first read this treatment of Genesis 13. Using brackets and bold type to insert his ideas, here is precisely what Wood is proposing as an understanding of the passage:

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev...and Lot went with him. From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar....And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot....So Abram said to Lot...,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

‘Let’s part company’ ....[**But after Abram and Lot had decided to separate, Lot continued to travel with Abram and their collective clans (that were already fighting and too numerous to remain together, as both Abram and Lot had already determined in a face to face discussion, with the resultant decision to separate). So together Abram and Lot and their quarreling herdsmen traveled all the way south toward Hebron, continuing past Hebron into a land far less capable of supporting flocks and herds than the northern pasture lands around Bethel and Ai. They continued southward, entering the desolate regions of the Valley of Siddim, rounding the southern end of the Salt Sea, then traveling into the Transjordan highlands east of the Salt Sea where**] Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*) [**that is, the Valley of Siddim**] was well watered, like the garden of Yahweh, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar....So Lot chose for himself the whole plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*) [**that is, the Valley of Siddim**] and set out toward the east [**that is, back toward the west**]....Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain (*hakikkar*) [**that is, the cities of the Valley of Siddim**] and pitched his tent near Sodom [= **Bab edh-Dhra**]. (Gen 13:1-12)

This kind of eisegesis is what results when ancillary, non-definitive passages and “pet” hypotheses are allowed to force their “interpretation” on an otherwise perfectly clear, definitive passage regarding the location of Sodom. Wood justifies this copious emendation of the text by saying, “Genesis 13 does not specifically state where the separation took place.”<sup>41</sup> He then concludes that Abram and Lot traveled “southeast of Hebron,” arriving at “a place ca. 15 mi (24 km) east of Bab edh-Dhra [just east above the Lisan] where Lot would have been close enough to observe the vegetation of the *kikkar* of the Jordan.”<sup>42</sup> But, as an unequivocal matter of fact, Genesis 13:1-12 specifies precisely where and when the separation of Abram and Lot took place: It occurred while they were tending their flocks and herds in the vicinity of Bethel/Ai. Abram began his movement toward Hebron only *after* Yahweh spoke to him in v.14, an event that clearly took place after Lot had already departed toward the east, toward Sodom. There is simply no other way to understand this passage. So, here it is again. Read it carefully:

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev...and Lot went with him. From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar....And quarreling arose between Abram’s herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot....So Abram said to Lot..., ‘Let’s part company’ ....Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*) was well watered, like the garden of Yahweh, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar....So Lot chose for himself the whole plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*) and set out toward the east....Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain (*hakikkar*) and pitched his tent near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against Yahweh. Yahweh said to Abram after Lot had departed from him, “Lift up your eyes...All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever....Go walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to Yahweh. (Gen 13:1-18)

There is no mistaking that Lot separated from Abram while they were tenting in the environs of Bethel and Ai. Abram “moved his tents” from Bethel/Ai to Mamre at Hebron only *after* Lot

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

had separated to Sodom, east of Bethel/Ai. This is a classical geographical recounting, in serial fashion, of the movements of the great Hebrew patriarch, Abram, and his nephew, Lot. It is clean; it is clear; and when using valid hermeneutical principles, virtually impossible to misinterpret. The authorial intent of this passage is straightforward, answering the simple question: Where did Abram and Lot travel, and how did Lot wind up in Sodom, and what route did he take to get there? It is all there, step by step, geographical marker by geographical marker, direction by direction. Anyone who suggests that this is not *the* definitive passage for the location of Sodom, purposefully written to direct the reader to the location of the Cities of the Plain, is obviously driven by an agenda that overrides plain grammar, syntax, and the most important hermeneutical ingredient of all—common sense.

Up to this point in Wood’s critique of a “northern Sodom” he has managed not a single valid argument either against the NST or in favor of the SST, but seems to be grasping at straws. Nonetheless, just when one thinks that the situation could not look worse for the southern Sodom camp, Wood launches into a discussion of a subject that proves to be the death-knell for the SST: the *kikkar*.<sup>43</sup> Wood continues:

Collins understands the Hebrew word *kikkar*, translated plain, as meaning a circular disk, and the Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea, according to Collins, matches that description. Any map or satellite photo of the area will show, however, that the plain is not circular, but rectangular in shape...The Hebrew word *kikkar* was used of bread (Ex 29:23) or a specified weight of precious metal, a talent (Ex 25:39). It is evident that it was the flatness of these objects that caused the word to be applied to a plain, rather than roundness.<sup>44</sup>

This is a territory I know well.<sup>45</sup> The Hebrew term *kikkar* is mirrored in virtually every Semitic language in the Near East. In Akkadian/Assyrian the word is *kakkaru*, meaning “metal disk” or “round loaf of bread.”<sup>46</sup> The equivalent of Heb. *kikkar* in Ugaritic is *kkr/kakkar*, meaning “metal disk” (“talent”).<sup>47</sup> Even Egyptian *kerker* means “to circle, to mark out a circle with a stick” and “talent” (a disk of metal).<sup>48</sup> (Not so incidentally, in modern Arabic its basic meaning is “a circle.”) One should also note that, outside the Old Testament, the term is never used in a geographical sense—never.

The Hebrew word for “plain” in every context dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah is *kikkar*. This word is interesting because, as I noted above, its basic meaning has nothing at all to do with

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<sup>43</sup> The subject of *kikkar* and *hakikkar* is something that I have researched rigorously, perhaps more extensively than most other scholars.

<sup>44</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 81.

<sup>45</sup> See Collins, “Geography...Cities of the Plain”; Collins, “Chronology...Cities of the Plain”; Collins, “Explorations...Jordan Disk”; Collins, “Forty Salient Points”; Collins, “Reassessing the Term *hakikkar*”; Collins, “Location of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. See also Black, George, and Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, second (corrected) printing (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 2000) 141; and Civil, Gelb, Oppenheim, and Reiner, *The Assyrian Dictionary vol. 8* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1971) 49-50.

<sup>47</sup> See my articles referenced in footnote 3; see also C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Revised Reprint (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1998) 419.

<sup>48</sup> See my articles referenced in footnote 3; see also E.A.W. Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary vol. 2* (New York: Dover, 1920/1978) 696.



geography. In fact, of the 68 times that the term is used in the Old Testament, it is only applied within a geographical context in thirteen instances.<sup>49</sup> Of those thirteen, seven of them are found in Genesis in relationship to Sodom and Gomorrah where it is translated “plain,” but all thirteen refer to the same general area north of the Dead Sea.<sup>50</sup> The remaining Old Testament usages of *kikkar* reveal the real sense of the term: 48 times it is used to designate a “talent” of silver, gold, iron, or lead; seven times it is translated “loaf” as in “loaf of bread.” Thus, a talent of silver or any other metal is a round, flat disk of metal used as a medium of exchange.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, loaves of bread in antiquity were usually disk-shaped.<sup>52</sup> This meaning holds true throughout the Semitic cognates, as I mentioned above.

Therefore, as a geographical semantic referent in the context of “the plain of the Jordan” and “the cities of the plain,” there is no doubt that the very use of the word *kikkar* denotes a circular, disk-shaped region. If the nature of the area being described were something other than a “circular plain,” another word would have been selected. There are several other common Hebrew words for valley, vale or region.<sup>53</sup> Scholars who translate *kikkar* as “valley” or merely “region” have completely missed the point of the word. It is quite clear that when we search for a geographical area upon which sat the Cities of the Plain, we are looking for a region that is perceptibly circular and disk-like, at least to an ancient, ground-based observer (satellite and aerial photos were not available in the Bronze Age!).

Even a cursory glance at a topographical (or satellite) map of the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea reveals the circular nature of the area. The sense of the disk-like plain is very impressive when one actually descends from the foothills onto the plain (*kikkar*) from the east (from the direction of present-day Amman), which sweeps around to the south and west toward the Dead Sea and around toward the north and west toward Jericho across the Jordan River. Indeed, Koehler and Baumgartner define the geographical meaning of *kikkar* as “the (roughly circular) territory of Lower Jordan (around Jericho) Gn 13, 10 f”<sup>54</sup> [their parentheses and notations], which is precisely the area I have just described.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See my detailed discussion of the subject in Collins, “Geography...Cities of the Plain” 4, 13-15.

<sup>50</sup> Collins, “Reassessing the Term *hakikkar*.”

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. See also P. Bienkowski, “Bread,” *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*, P. Bienkowski and A. Millard, eds. (London: British Museum, 2000) 59.

<sup>53</sup> Common Hebrew words such *biqah*, ‘*emeq*, *gey*’, *nakhal*, ‘*arabah*, ‘*elon*, *mishor* and *shephelah*, for example, all have a wide range of meanings having to do with low places, topographical depressions, low-lying plains, cleft valleys, and wadis. But this is not true of *kikkar* which, when used geographically, refers only to a circular area resembling a talent (metal disk) or a round loaf of bread. And *kikkar* is absolutely consistent in retaining its meaning of “circle” throughout all its known uses among the Semitic cognates.

<sup>54</sup> L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros: A Dictionary of the Hebrew Old Testament in English and German* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

<sup>55</sup> I have spent a great deal of time in the region of the Lower Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea, surveying, exploring, and excavating. For purposes of research, few scholars have spent more time there than I have. When you stand on Mount Nebo, and look toward the Jordan and the northern end of the Dead Sea, the view of the circular plain (*kikkar*) is quite dramatic. It is equally dramatic, and circular, when standing in the midst of it. From every vantage point, the perception of the area is that of a disk or shallow bowl.

A. F. Rainey, arguably the world's leading historical geographer relative to the Bible, agrees that the Kikkar (= circle, disk) is north of the Dead Sea. Regarding my research on the subject he states that

Your arguments about the Kikkar are the most cogent....The map in the Atlas [*The Sacred Bridge*] does need revision. I should have tagged it like the Shishak map, "highly conjectural." Gen 13 has to do with the high ground east of Bethel. As I said earlier, the references to the *kikkar* fit better with the area N. of the Dead Sea....As a sideline, it is usually ignored that the term "arabah" applies to the Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea (2 Sam 4, about the assassins of Ish-baal). Too bad the author there did not use the term *kikkar*.<sup>56</sup>

J. D. Tabor's recent work on a new translation of the Old Testament elicits the comment that

I have favored the "northern Sodom" theory for years now, not because of any archaeological evidence of which I am aware, but mostly just based on my reading of Genesis and the translation work I have done. In the *Transparent English Version*, of which I am the editor, we translated Genesis 13:10-11 (with the note): "And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the circuit of the Jordan, that it was completely watered—before YHVH ruined Sodom and Gomorrah—as the garden of YHVH, as the land of Egypt in your coming toward Zoar. And Lot chose for himself all the circuit\* of the Jordan, and Lot pulled up stakes from the east, and they were separated, a man from upon his brother...[Note:] \*Heb *kikkar*, something round, a coin, a loaf of bread, or here, an area."

Also, my reading of Josephus supports the same conclusion. Even though he is a very late witness, he seems to reflect/preserve older traditions...I am very excited and encouraged by your work.<sup>57</sup>

A. Mazar is also familiar with my textual/geographical research on the *kikkar*, and offers the following:

I agree with you that real geographical background can be found in many biblical stories...such as the patriarchal stories...I also agree with you that a straightforward reading of Gen 13:1-12 would call for the conclusion that when the author wrote *Kikkar Hayarden* he meant the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea...its supposed location in the mind of the biblical author.<sup>58</sup>

T. Daughtrey offers that

I do not think that there is an error in the "northern view" of the location of Sodom. I have reviewed the evidence and weighed it against everything that I know at present, and I am convinced that the argument is sound. In fact, I firmly believe that you have a much stronger argument, though it is still an inductive argument, than we normally get in Biblical studies whether we actually excavate the Tell [el-Hammam] or not.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, I. Finkelstein's analysis of my views on the Kikkar resulted in this comment: "There is strong logic in your understanding of the geography behind the description of the

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<sup>56</sup> Author's email discussions with Prof. Anson F. Rainey, summer 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Author's email discussions with Prof. James D. Tabor, summer 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Author's email discussions with Prof. Amihai Mazar, summer 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Author's email discussions with Prof. Terrell Daughtrey, summer 2005.

*kikkar*.”<sup>60</sup> It is neither a stretch nor inaccurate for me to state that practically every scholar who has examined my treatment of the subject agrees that the authorial intent in each context, wherein *kikkar* is used geographically in the Hebrew Scriptures, points to the disk-like southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea.

In spite of all this, Wood insists that “Any map or satellite photo of the area will show...that the plain is not circular, but rectangular in shape.”<sup>61</sup> I encourage anyone to look at the satellite photo of the area included in Wood’s own article. If one looks carefully at that photo and traces the hills surrounding the southern Jordan Valley, one sees the distinctly circular shape of the Kikkar north of the Dead Sea. In fact, it is visible in its entirety from the edge of the scarp just east of Bethel/Ai, as Genesis 13:10 states. A sense of the circular shape of the area is gained from the hills around the *kikkar*, or when one is standing anywhere on it, not merely from a satellite map. When standing in the middle of it, the perception is distinctly one of a green, well-watered disk or bowl of agricultural land encircling the perimeter of vision.

To state concerning *kikkar/hakikkar* that “it was the flatness of these objects [talents; loaves] that caused the word to be applied to a plain, rather than roundness”<sup>62</sup> is to miss the whole reason the writer of the text used *kikkar* in the first place. Bear in mind, *kikkar* means nothing but “circle,” “disk of metal (talent),” “circular loaf.” In no Semitic cognate or any other language of the ancient Near East does that combination of phonemes mean “flat.” If the author meant “flat,” there are numerous Hebrew words for geographical flat places, valleys, low places, and plains; he purposely did not use any of them. His intent was to use this particular descriptive secondary referent because the area invariably reminded one of those common *circular* objects—talents and loaves.

Wood presses his argument further:

...Sodom and Gomorrah and the Cities of the Plain were associated with the *kikkar* of the Jordan (Gn 13:10, 11). The plain north of the Dead Sea was called the *kikkar* of the valley of Jericho (Dt 34:3, KJV), not the *kikkar* of the Jordan. A different *kikkar* of the Jordan from the one the Cities of the Plain were associated with was located between Zarethan...and Succoth...(1 Kgs 7:46). It is squarish in shape.<sup>63</sup>

Yes, Sodom and Gomorrah were “associated with the *kikkar* of the Jordan.” I heartily agree. However, Wood fails to ascertain that “the Jordan” (*hayarden*) never refers to anything other than the fresh water system of the Jordan River proper, north of the Dead Sea.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the Jordan River is said to begin (or end, depending on whether one is traveling northward or southward) at “the mouth of the Jordan” (Josh 15:5; 18:19). The boundary of the tribe of Benjamin is instructive in regard to the extent of the area to which the term *hayarden* can be applied:

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<sup>60</sup> Author’s email discussions with Prof. Israel Finkelstein, summer 2006.

<sup>61</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 81.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Attempts to force *hayarden* to apply to the Dead Sea valley proper are simply fallacious. There is not a single use of *hayarden* in the OT that could possibly be extended south of the “mouth of the Jordan” which is at the north end of the Dead Sea. It is obvious that SST advocates are willing to overlook such things in order to protect the theory’s hermeneutical vulnerabilities.

[The Benjamin border] went to the northern slope of Beth Hoglah and came out at the northern bay of the Salt [Dead] Sea, at the mouth of the Jordan (*hayarden*) in the south. This was the southern boundary. The Jordan (*hayarden*) formed the boundary on the eastern side. These were the boundaries that marked out the inheritance of the clans of Benjamin... (Josh 18:19-20)

If the mouth of the *hayarden* is where the Jordan River emptied into the Dead Sea's northern end, by what kind of geographical gymnastics could anyone possibly extend it southward to include any portion of the Valley of Siddim, i.e., the Dead Sea valley? There is no context of *hayarden* in the Old Testament whereby it could be extended any further south than its "mouth." Any piece of geography connected with *hayarden* is, by definition, north of the Dead Sea.

Here is another definitive passage on the extent of the Jordan:

But to the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory extending from Gilead down to the Arnon Gorge (the middle of the Gorge being the border) and out to the Jabbok River, which is the border of the Ammonites. Its western border was the Jordan (*hayarden*) in the Arabah, from Kinnereth to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt [Dead] Sea), below the slopes of Pisgah. (Deut 3:16-17)

Pisgah is just east/northeast of the Dead Sea's north-eastern corner, and *hayarden* ends at that latitude. Here is yet another:

[Og's] land extended from Aroer on the rim of the Arnon Gorge to Mount Siyon (that is, Hermon), and included all the Arabah east of the Jordan, as far as the Sea of the Arabah [Dead Sea], below the slopes of Pisgah. (Deut 4:48-49)

Note carefully that this territory extends from Mount Hermon all the way down to the Arnon Gorge (at about the Dead Sea's halfway point), and that it included "all the Arabah east of *hayarden*," which went only as far south as the northern end of the Dead Sea below Pisgah. If *hayarden* included the Dead Sea Valley, then it would have said "all the Arabah east of *hayarden* as far as the Arnon Gorge." The Dead Sea—aka Sea of the Arabah, aka Salt Sea—cradled in the Valley of Siddim, never overlaps with the Jordan or anything belonging to *hayarden*, including the *kikkar* and the cities located there. Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim were the Cities of the Plain (*kikkar*) of the Jordan (*hayarden*), and were in the southern Jordan Valley, east of the river, north of the Dead Sea. Wood's arguments on this issue are exegetically inadequate. Attempts to extend *hayarden* to include any part of the Dead Sea or Valley of Siddim are unsupported, contrived to support the myth of a southern Sodom. (See my detailed discussions of this issue elsewhere.<sup>65</sup>)

### ***Status Report on the SST and NST: How Each Stacks Up against the Biblical Geography***

The SST requires numerous ancillary hypotheses in order to make it work geographically:

1. Assumes a subtending explanation as to why Genesis 13:1-12 should not be considered the definitive passage on the location of the Cities of the Plain, but fails to provide such.
2. Assumes a reason why the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira should somehow be considered a separate phenomenon from the demise of Early Bronze Age cities

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<sup>65</sup> See my articles cited in footnote 3.

throughout the Levant occurring at roughly the same time (ca. 2350 BCE), but the fact is neither stated nor explained.

3. Assumes a rationale for a necessary longitudinal connection between Gerar and Sodom, rather than a simple statement of west and east boundaries (i.e., from the coast of Canaan to the Rift Valley); however, no such rationale is given.
4. Assumes an explanation of why Hazazon Tamar is not En Gedi (in contradiction to 2 Chronicles 20:2), and why the battle would not have taken place north of En Gedi as Kedorlaomer marched northward toward the Cities on the Plain, then on to Dan, but no such explanation is given.
5. Assumes there is justification for assigning a geographical interpretation to “right hand/south” in Ezekiel 16:46, while ignoring the “younger sister” designation for Sodom, and also failing to consider the poetic/metaphorical nature of the passage, yet no such justification is forthcoming.
6. Assumes there is a biblical reason for locating Zoar south of the Dead Sea, and for ignoring that Zoar was the southern border town of the Reuben tribal allotment, the unequivocal border of which was the Arnon Gorge, which also served as the northern border of Moab; no such reasons are given.
7. Assumes there is a good hermeneutical reason for denying that Lot (a) saw the “whole *kikkar* of the Jordan” from the area of Bethen/Ai, (b) traveled eastward from that area toward Sodom, and (c) accomplished his separation from Abraham while in the vicinity of Bethel/Ai before Abram moved his tents to Mamre near Hebron; however, no hermeneutical reason is given for any of these assumptions.
8. Assumes that a good explanation exists as to why “*kikkar* of the Jordan” is a different location altogether than “the *kikkar* of the valley of Jericho,” in contradiction to the fact that “the Jordan” (*hayarden*) never in Scripture extends south of the “mouth of the Jordan”; no such explanation is offered.
9. Assumes that one can use *kikkar* to mean “flat” in complete contradiction to all its known usages which are based on the core meaning “circle,” but no linguistic data is cited.

The geographical components of the SST, as formulated by Wood, are a collection of unsupported (unsupportable) assumptions forced *contra* to the biblical text because of the *a priori* notion that Sodom was in the southern Dead Sea area. One should also observe that not one of the SST’s ancillary hypotheses is fleshed out and justified—they are conveniently assumed.

In stark contrast, the NST need not raise a single ancillary hypothesis to support itself. When the Cities of the Plain are placed north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River, which is natural and normal to the textual language (using the definitive Genesis 13:1-12 as the hermeneutical baseline), everything else falls into place with the pleasant consistency of truth.

### ***Geological Considerations***

Of course, if the geographical foundation of the SST is untenable, then a geological discussion is thereby unnecessary. Nonetheless, I will examine it. Wood opines:

The geology of the plain south of the Dead Sea also points to this area as being the location of the Cities of the Plain. Genesis 14:10 states, “now the Valley of Siddim was full of tar (*ḥēmār*) pits.” *Ḥēmār* is bitumen, a naturally occurring petroleum substance similar to asphalt. It was used extensively in antiquity for mortar, sealing and as a binding agent, and is commonly found in the area south of the Dead Sea. The material that fell on the plain causing the destruction of everything save Zoar was *goprît*, sulfurous oil (black sulfur). Petroleum and sulfur are also present south of the Dead Sea.<sup>66</sup>

Again, I must ask an obvious question: What does the location of bitumen seeps have necessarily to do with the location of Sodom? Simply put: nothing. The biblical text only states that some of the men from the “Kikkar Coalition” army fell into bitumen?/slime?/mud? pits upon being routed by the forces of Kedorlaomer (Gen 14:10). Since the battle actually took place north of Hazazon Tamar (= En Gedi; 2 Chron 20:2), the location of the tar?/slime? would have been in that area, toward the northern end of the Dead Sea<sup>67</sup> where, in fact, much bitumen/asphalt was mined out in ancient times, particularly by the Romans. Bitumen was found on both ends of the Dead Sea, so the location of such cannot be determinative for the location of the Genesis 14 battle which, in itself, has no bearing on the location of Sodom.

Wood’s suggestion that the Hebrew term *goprît* means “sulfurous oil (black sulfur)” is untenable. The word simply has no such meaning. The semantic domain of *goprît* ranges from “sulfur” to “lightning,” but in no instance is it ever linked to anything like petroleum. The phonemic/base meaning of the word “denotes an inflammable material of which lightning was held to consist,”<sup>68</sup> but we cannot attribute a specific chemical meaning to the term, at least not in any modern, scientific sense.<sup>69</sup> This “exegesis” is the result of an active imagination, not linguistic realities.

The real problem with Wood’s fanciful styling of *goprît* is revealed in his suggestion that this “sulfurous oil” somehow spewed out of the ground high into the air, ignited, then “fell on the plain causing the destruction rained down on the Cities of the Plain.” Two serious drawbacks to this idea are obvious. The first is hermeneutical: a straightforward reading of the biblical text shows that “Yahweh rained down fire and *goprît* on Sodom and Gomorrah—from Yahweh out of the heavens” (Gen 19:24). The clear biblical language states that the fiery matrix raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah came “out of the heavens,” not “out of the ground, up into the air, and down again to the plain.” Once again, Wood is forced to emend the text to accommodate his ideas, rather than letting the text determine the nature of the phenomenon. The grammar and syntax of the passage could invite speculation about a meteorite airburst event (as in Tunguska, Siberia, 1908), intense electromagnetic (lightning) strikes, or fire from the “nostrils” of God himself, but not a geologically-based destruction. If the ground opened up to produce this event, then why does not the text simply say so?

The second drawback to Wood’s petroleum hypothesis is his use of Neev’s and Emery’s<sup>70</sup> theories as a basis for an earth-based destructive phenomenon. The kinds of events about which

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<sup>66</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 79.

<sup>67</sup> Neev and Emery, *Destruction of Sodom* 142-143.

<sup>68</sup> J. A. Naude, “1730 גפרית,” *NIDOTTE vol. 1* 889.

<sup>69</sup> S. Collins, “Terms of Destruction for the Cities of the Plain,” *BRB* II.16 (2002).

<sup>70</sup> Neev and Emery, *Destruction of Sodom*.

Neev and Emery speculate, based on their interpretation of the geology of the Rift Valley, would have occurred in times more ancient than the biblical timeframe for Abram and Lot. In fact, their take on the Sodom saga is that it arose etiologically in the local lore from collective memories of catastrophes that must have occurred in the area toward the end of EB III (2350 BCE), with the same event(s) giving rise to the stories about the destruction of Jericho.<sup>71</sup> In no way do they suggest that geological phenomena somehow “targeted” the Cities of the Plain as the local catastrophe described in Genesis 19. Neither Neev nor Emery would agree with Wood’s application of their theories.

Wood’s take on the well-watered *kikkar* is also misleading:

“Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of Jordan was well watered...like the land of Egypt” (Gn 13:10). Collins interprets this as referring to the annual flooding of the Jordan River, similar to the Nile River. The Hebrew words used, however, do not support this interpretation. The Hebrew words translated “well watered” are *kullāh*, meaning “all of it,” and *mašqeh*, a noun derived from the causative form of the verb meaning “to drink,” giving the meaning “completely irrigated.” Thus the allusion is to the irrigated land of Goshen in the northeast delta of Egypt where the Israelites lived during their sojourn in Egypt.<sup>72</sup>

As one who has excavated in the Nile Delta region, Wood should know better than this. The civilization of Egypt depended entirely on the annual inundations of the Nile. Without the annual inundations, there would not have been enough cultivable land to support a large Egyptian population. High inundations were a disaster, as were low ones. Irrigation canals were created specifically to control the potential extremes of the Nile’s inundation cycle.<sup>73</sup> The biblical text states clearly that “the whole *kikkar* (= disk) of the Jordan [River] was well-watered...like Egypt” (Gen 13:10). What Wood misses here is the fact that the Bronze Age cities north of the Dead Sea also used irrigation extensively<sup>74</sup> in order to take advantage of (as well as to control) the annual inundations of the Jordan River which spread several kilometers from the main channel during the springtime—which is why settlement patterns in the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea are always a predictable distance from the River.

When one pays attention to both hydrological statements in Genesis 13:10, the meaning of “like Egypt” becomes obvious, because they both specify the same thing. The first one says the *kikkar* was “well-watered, like the garden of Yahweh.” Of that garden Genesis 2:10 says: “A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.” A single river watered the garden of Yahweh. Only after it left the garden did it divide into four

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 121-138.

<sup>72</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 79.

<sup>73</sup> O. Borowski, “Irrigation” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* vol. 3, E. M. Myers, ed. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1997) 181-184.

<sup>74</sup> Excavation reports from Tall Nimrin abound with insights regarding irrigation on the eastern Jordan Disk. See J. W. Flanagan (Case Western University), D. W. McCreery (Willamette University), and K. N. Yassine (University of Jordan). See J. W. Flanagan and D. W. McCreery, “First Preliminary Report of the 1989 Tell Nimrin Project,” *ADAJ* 34 (1990) 131-152; J. W. Flanagan and D. W. McCreery, “Preliminary Report of the 1990 Excavation at Tell Nimrin,” *ADAJ* 36 (1992) 89-111; J. W. Flanagan, D. W. McCreery, and K. N. Yassine, “Tell Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the 1993 Season,” *ADAJ* 38 (1994) 205-244; and J. W. Flanagan, D. W. McCreery, and K. N. Yassine, “Tall Nimrin: Preliminary Report on the 1995 Excavation and Geological Survey,” *ADAJ* 40 (1996) 271-292.

channels. To say that the *kikkar* was “well-watered...like Egypt” was to compare the life-giving Jordan River system (north of the Dead Sea!) with the life-sustaining power of “a river”—the Nile—something that Moses would have known from firsthand experience. The southern Dead Sea area does not have “a river”; it has only wadis with seasonal runoff. The *kikkar* of the Jordan does have “a (major) river”; and it was, in the mind of the Genesis writer, the focal point of the Jordan Disk (= *kikkar*) in the same way that “a (major) river” sustained both the garden of Yahweh and ancient Egypt.

Wood continues:

Paleobotanical studies have shown that there was a rich diversity of crops grown at Bab edh-Dhra and her nearby sister city Numeira, probably Gomorrah. Most common were barley, wheat, grapes, figs, lentils and flax. Less common were chickpeas, peas, broad beans, dates and olives. Several of these crops could only have been grown with the use of irrigation....”<sup>75</sup>

I must point out that site cultigen analysis does not necessarily reveal what was being grown in a given locale. These botanical materials may often indicate that a city/village had access to agricultural products grown in other areas. Any way one looks at this, it has nothing to do with the location of Sodom at all. On the eastern Jordan Disk north of the Dead Sea numerous Early Bronze Age sites dating to the same period as Bab edh-Dhra exist, but they extend into the Middle Bronze Age (the time of Abram—the largest of these is Tall el-Hammam), and show the same kind of agricultural repertoire.<sup>76</sup> There is nothing here that argues in favor of the SST.

### ***Status Report on the SST and NST: How Each Stacks Up against the Local Geology***

Wood’s version of the SST requires numerous ancillary hypotheses in order to make it work geologically:

1. Assumes that *goprit* means “sulfurous oil” in diametric opposition to its actual semantic parameters ranging from “sulfur” to “lightning.”
2. Assumes the fiery destruction that rained down on the Cities of the Plain first came up out of the earth, then went up into the sky, caught fire, then came down to the earth again—all contra the face-value statement of Genesis 13:10 that the “fire and *goprit*” simply “rained down...from Yahweh out of the heavens.”
3. Assumes that a geologically-based destruction is documentable within the timeframe of Abram and Lot, when no such evidence exists.
4. Assumes there is some means to explain away the fact that there is/was no river in the southern Dead Sea area—as required by Genesis 13:10 in comparison to “the garden of Yahweh” (which had a major river) and “Egypt” (which had a major river)—but only wadis carrying seasonal runoff; all while ignoring the fact that the *kikkar* of the Jordan north of the Dead Sea has, in fact, a major river that inundates its delta region annually just like the Nile.

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<sup>75</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 79.

<sup>76</sup> See sources on Tall Nimrin in footnote 74.



5. Assumes that the well-watered agricultural area immediately north of the Dead Sea was inferior to the agricultural capabilities of the southern area; when, in fact, the lands immediately north of the Dead Sea have always been, and still are, almost infinitely better farmland than the southern Dead Sea areas ever were.

Geologically, the SST dies on the edge of Occam's Razor due to a raft of unsupportable ancillary hypotheses.

In stark contrast, the NST need not raise a single ancillary hypothesis to demonstrate its veracity. Again, when the Cities of the Plain are placed north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River, which is natural and normal to the textual language (using the definitive Genesis 13:1-12 as the hermeneutical baseline), the geological data needs no imagination to make it fit. (At Tall el-Hammam, the destruction debris at the Middle Bronze Age level is, thus far, dramatic, including the presence of sulfur and a host of remarkable heating and melting phenomena<sup>77</sup>).

### **CHRONOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR LOCATING SODOM**

If Wood's foregoing arguments in favor of the SST are weak, then his chronological evidence can only be called disastrous. He begins:

Collins maintains that the Cities of the Plain "must date from the Middle Bronze Age" which is "the only possible timeframe for Abraham." He reaches this conclusion by lowering the dates for Abraham 215 years by using a Sojourn of 215 years rather than 430 as stipulated in Exodus 12:40. Ray has carefully reviewed all of the pertinent evidence regarding the Sojourn and concludes: "the various lines of evidence would seem to indicate that the 430 years should be taken at face value for the Israelite sojourn in Egypt."<sup>78</sup>

I have dealt with this issue in detail elsewhere,<sup>79</sup> but let me summarize briefly here. First, the only piece of evidence that supports a 430-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt is the Masoretic Text (ca. 10<sup>th</sup> century AD) of Exodus 12:40. All other lines of evidence<sup>80</sup>—the Septuagint (LXX) versions, the Masoretic patriarchal chronologies, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Josephus, and even St. Paul—confirm unequivocally that the Israelites sojourned "in Canaan and in Egypt" 430 years. Paul's letter to the Galatians confirms this, so I do not need to belabor the point:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is

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<sup>77</sup> Melted roofing materials (daub) infused with sulfur, "fired" mudbricks, thick ash and destruction debris, all testify to a fiery end for the MBA occupation at Tall el-Hammam. This is followed by a (strange) occupational gap of several centuries, which seems ubiquitous to the eastern Jordan Disk. See S. Collins, G. A. Byers, M. Luddeni, and J. W. Moore, *The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project End of Season Activity Report, Season Two: 2006/2007 Excavation and Exploration*, as submitted to the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (5 February 2007). In addition, see references on the Tall Nimrin excavation in footnote 74 for information on the MBA demise of that site, followed by several centuries of inoccupation.

<sup>78</sup> Wood, "Locating Sodom" 81.

<sup>79</sup> Collins, "Chronology...Cities of the Plain"; also S. Collins, "The Length of the Israelite Sojourn in Egypt," *BRB* IV.6 (2004).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant....” (Gal 3:16-17)

Paul here confirms the LXX chronology of the sojourn: it was 430 years from the giving of the promises to Abram (Gen 12, 15) until the coming of the Law under Moses. Wood’s reliance on J. P. Ray’s paper supporting a long (430 years) sojourn in Egypt is ill-advised,<sup>81</sup> but, in reality, the point is moot because the earliest possible date for the birth of Abram—even with a long Egyptian sojourn—is 2166 BCE, long after the destruction of any of the southern Dead Sea sites. Wood continues:

Starting with the date of the Exodus at 1446 BC and a Sojourn of 430 years, a straightforward reading of the chronological data in the Old Testament yields dates for Abraham of 2166–1991 BC, with the destruction of the Cities of the Plain occurring in 2067 BC at the end of the Early Bronze (EB) period. Collins, however, lowers this date by 215 years to 1852 BC in the Middle Bronze I period. Since Middle Bronze Age pottery was found at Tall el-Hammam, Collins concludes that it must be Sodom. But he is vague about what phase of the Middle Bronze Age Tall el-Hammam was occupied. The Middle Bronze Age was very long, stretching from ca. 1920–1483 BC. More specific dating must be provided before a correlation can be made with Biblical Sodom.<sup>82</sup>

While I concur with Wood on the approximate date of the Exodus in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE,<sup>83</sup> I must point out that both the early and late dates for Abraham place him in the Middle Bronze Age, as recognized by virtually every conservative scholar from W. F. Albright<sup>84</sup> to K. A. Kitchen.<sup>85</sup> Wood is also using period dates that are somewhat out of sync with the most-used chronologies for the Transjordan based on the latest ceramic typologies<sup>86</sup> and resultant stratigraphic sequences (this is a minor point, but does need to be mentioned in this context). It must also be understood that there are still two chronologies in use in the literature, although the “new” one is quickly replacing the “old” one. The old chronology stacks up like this (with small variations scholar to scholar): Early Bronze Age I (3300-3050 BCE); EB II (3050-2700 BCE); EB III (2700-2350 BCE); EB IV (2350-2200 BCE); Middle Bronze Age I (2200-1950 BCE); MB IIA (1950-1800 BCE); MB IIB-C (1800-1550 BCE). The new chronological configuration looks like this (with minor deviations scholar to scholar):

Early Bronze I	3300-3050 BCE
Early Bronze II	3050-2700 BCE
Early Bronze III	2700-2350 BCE
Intermediate Bronze	2350-2000 BCE (old EB IV+MB I)
Middle Bronze I	2000-1800 BCE (old MB II A)
Middle Bronze II	1800-1550 BCE (old MB II B-C)

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Note also that Ray’s article on the subject is reproduced in the same issue of *Bible and Spade*. Perhaps *BS* will publish my refutation of Ray’s views in a future issue.

<sup>82</sup> Wood, “Locating Sodom” 81-82.

<sup>83</sup> I do prefer the LXX date of 1406 BCE for the Exodus. See my reasoning in S. Collins, “Using Historical Synchronisms to Identify the Pharaoh of the Exodus,” *BRB* V.8 (2005).

<sup>84</sup> W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1974).

<sup>85</sup> K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 313-372.

<sup>86</sup> R. E. Hendrix, P. R. Drey, and J. B. Storfjell, *Ancient Pottery of Transjordan* (Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archaeology/Horn Archaeological Museum, Andrews University, 1996) 57-66.

Thus, no matter which “literal” biblical chronology one chooses for Abraham—2166-1991 BCE or 1951-1776 BCE—his lifespan falls entirely within the Middle Bronze Age of the old chronology, and backs somewhat into the Intermediate Bronze Age in the new chronology using the earliest imaginable Abrahamic date. Since, however, the early date for Abraham is difficult to support (as I have clearly demonstrated<sup>87</sup>), the duration of his life falls solidly in the midst of the MBA. One must also consider that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all experienced the same socio-cultural (climatological?) regime that drove masses of Asiatics into Egypt’s Nile Delta region during the MBA, resulting in the Hyksos takeover of Lower Egypt.<sup>88</sup> The first half of the Middle Bronze Age rode on a climatological upswing that allowed the Levantine population to burgeon, culminating in the apex of Canaanite culture.<sup>89</sup> The second half of the MBA was rough going in the Levant, a phenomenon that is mirrored with remarkable fidelity in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. This was likely due to climatological factors occurring farther to the north that created a southward migratory “domino effect” pushing clans like those of the biblical patriarchs into a hospitable Lower Egypt dominated by Asiatic Semites.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the best historically synchronous placement of Abraham is well into the MBA, toward the second half of the MBA and the onset of the complex phenomena that forced a significant segment of the Levantine population into Lower Egypt.

Wood states that I am “vague about what phase of the Middle Bronze Age Tall el-Hammam was occupied.” We are only now entering our third excavation season, and our sub-phasing is not yet defined, but we know that it was destroyed during the Middle Bronze Age and not reoccupied for at least five to seven centuries (late Iron I or Iron II), which matches the biblical profile of Sodom.<sup>91</sup> However, as I stated above, Abraham could fit into either MB I or MB II. Since Tall el-Hammam is in the right place biblically, and is the largest Bronze Age site in the region (as Scripture suggests for Sodom), it is reasonable to propose that the excavation of this magnificent site may provide chronological specificity for the destruction of Sodom and, thus, the correct dates for Abraham (this is not an unreasonable expectation). While Wood states that “Middle Bronze Age pottery was found at Tall el-Hammam,” he fails at this point to mention that a significant section of the MB fortification system was also unearthed during the 2007 season. A section of an MB residence was also excavated, revealing approximately one meter of ash and destruction debris.

In the light of the foregoing discussion on the biblical chronology of Abraham—which falls within the MBA whether he is dated early or late—it is difficult to understand Wood’s statement that “the destruction of the Cities of the Plain occurring in 2067 BC at the end of the Early Bronze (EB) period.” I cannot think of a single Near Eastern historian or archaeologist who would agree with that assertion. In the old chronology, Wood’s Sodom destruction date of 2067 BCE (which is 215 year too early!) falls during the second half of MB I (2200-1950 BCE). In the

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<sup>87</sup> Collins, “Chronology...Cities of the Plain.” See also S. Collins, “Length...Sojourn in Egypt.”

<sup>88</sup> W. C. Hayes, “The Hyksos infiltration and the founding of the Fifteenth Dynasty” in *The Cambridge Ancient History* vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge U., 1973) 54-60.

<sup>89</sup> M. Broshi and R. Gophna, “Middle Bronze Age II Palestine: Its Settlements and Population,” *BASOR* 261 (1986) 73-90; A. Kempinski, “The Middle Bronze Age” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, A. Ben-Tor, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1992) 159-210.

<sup>90</sup> Neev and Emery, *Destruction of Sodom* 59-72.

<sup>91</sup> Collins, “Chronology...Cities of the Plain.”

new chronology, 2067 BCE falls toward the end of the Intermediate Bronze Age (2350-2000 BCE). By no stretch of the imagination does that date connect with “the end of the Early Bronze period” as Wood claims. If one insists on correlating the destruction of Sodom with the end of the Early Bronze Age—as Wood seems bent on doing—then Tall el-Hammam is a much better candidate for at least three reasons: (a) biblically, it is in the correct location; (b) it is surrounded by several EB sites—all within 9 kilometers—that could qualify as the other Cities of the Plain; and (c) it is the largest EB site in the entire Rift Valley, which is how the biblical text represents Sodom.

There is also another angle to the chronological issue that Wood has never dealt with in any of his writings on the subject, i.e., what I call “cultural specificity,” something that K. A. Kitchen has written on extensively.<sup>92</sup> Kitchen correctly observes that Abraham’s covenants/contracts as presented in the patriarchal narratives are fashioned in the Middle Bronze Age tradition, and not in the structure of earlier or later documents of similar genre. For those who take the biblical text as real history, note that Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 12, 15, 17) is already in place before the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19), and Abraham’s covenant with Abimelech follows immediately after (Gen 20). The covenants of the Abrahamic narrative are fully Middle Bronze Age treaty structures, and do not belong to the Early Bronze Age or Intermediate Bronze Age.<sup>93</sup> For Abraham’s covenants to be structured in the MBA tradition, he must be dated within the MBA, which demands that the destruction of Sodom itself had to have taken place well into the MBA. Tall el-Hammam has the MBA occupation to correlate with this fact. Bab edh-Dhra and the southern sites do not.

### ***Status Report on the SST and NST: How Each Stacks Up Chronologically***

The SST (with Bab edh-Dhra as Sodom) as Wood has demonstrated, requires numerous ancillary hypotheses in order to make it work chronologically:

1. Assumes that arguments for the early date of Abraham are superior to those for later date scenarios, but this is unsubstantiated.
2. Assumes a posture that ignores remarkable historical synchronisms between the patriarchal narratives and socio-cultural (+ climatological?) phenomena in the Levant during the second half of the Middle Bronze Age.
3. Assumes that it is legitimate to “fudge” on the dating of the end of the Early Bronze Age (pushing it about 300 years later), or to somehow stretch the dates of Abraham backward, in order to get the two together for the destruction of Sodom, but no such rationale is provided (and virtually no other scholars would be willing to do it<sup>94</sup>).
4. Assumes it is good enough simply to state that the destruction of Sodom took place at the end of the Early Bronze Age, ignoring the fact that the end of the EBA in no way enters the picture based on the biblical chronology for Abraham, early or late.

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<sup>92</sup> Kitchen, *Reliability OT*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 323-324.

<sup>94</sup> Except maybe someone like D. Rohl, whose radical re-dating ideas Wood has opposed; see D. Rohl, *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest* (New York: Crown, 1995).

The SST is rife with chronological disparities between Bab edh-Dhra and biblical Sodom, which is why the W. F. Albright/G. E. Wright version of the SST insisted on sinking Sodom beneath the shallow waters at the south end of the Dead Sea, rejecting any correlation between the Cities of the Plain and the area's EBA sites.

The NST rests comfortably on the fact that numerous sites exist on the eastern Jordan Disk (*kikkar*) north of the Dead Sea which have the EBA (Gen 10), MBA (Gen 13ff.) profile, followed by several centuries of inoccupation. A specific date for the MB destruction of sites like Tall Nimrin and Tall el-Hammam could help us understand more about the chronology of the patriarchal period, and how the patriarchal life spans may have been calculated by the ancient nomadic mind.<sup>95</sup>

### STRATIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE FOR LOCATING SODOM

As if Wood's chronological difficulties were not enough, he continues with a discussion of archaeological stratigraphy:

Collins' third criterion for identifying Tall el-Hammam with Sodom is stratigraphy, i.e., the archaeological phases found at the site. He maintains that a Middle Bronze Age destruction should be found, followed by "at least a few centuries of abandonment" since Moses found the area to be uninhabited according to Numbers 21:20. Since the evidence points to a southern location for Sodom, however, the reference to "wasteland" in Numbers 21:20 is irrelevant, given that it applies to the *kikkar* of the valley of Jericho and not to Sodom.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps Wood has misunderstood my argument. If the NST is correct, and Tall el-Hammam happens (or is claimed) to be Sodom, then the NST would require Tall el-Hammam and the other related sites to conform to the statement in Numbers 21:20 that that same area in the time of Moses was mostly an uninhabited wasteland. That Wood continues to insist that the SST is based on better evidence than the NST (which it certainly is not) is immaterial to my point. The point is that, if the NST is true, then it follows that it should conform to all ancillary geographical, chronological, and stratigraphical criteria set forth by textual analysis and good hermeneutics. It does. Indeed, as I have shown earlier in this article, Wood's geographical claims about the *kikkar* (actually, multiple *kikkarim*!) cannot hold up under rigorous scrutiny, and should be dismissed.

Wood continues his discussion:

Since "Occupation at the site [of Tall el-Hammam] came to an abrupt halt...during the Middle Bronze Age" and Middle Bronze Age remains were found in one area "buried under nearly 3 ft (1 m) of ash and destructive debris," Collins assumes a match with the destruction of Sodom as described in Genesis 19. But he fails to provide a date for this destruction, and there has been insufficient excavation to determine if it is site-wide or merely a local occurrence. In order for there to be a match with Sodom, it is necessary to have evidence for a massive site and area-wide destruction by fire, accompanied by an

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<sup>95</sup> For a bit of speculation in this regard, see S. Collins and J. W. Moore, "Abraham and Tell Nimrin: Does the Chronology Work?" in S. Collins, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah* (Albuquerque: TSU Press, 2006) 87-88.

<sup>96</sup> Wood, "Locating Sodom" 82.

enormous earthquake, in 2067 BC (or 1852 BC, according to Collins' chronology). This has not yet been demonstrated for Tall el-Hammam.<sup>97</sup>

Yes, all the evidence presently suggests that Tall el-Hammam did come to an abrupt end during the MBA—as did nearby Tall Nimrin and several others.<sup>98</sup> But both the late and early dates for Abraham are likely formulaic in some way,<sup>99</sup> and may be adjustable downward to a reasonable degree. No, we do not know the precise date for the destruction of the MB city at Tall el-Hammam at this point. However, I suggest that the date of that destruction will correspond much better to the biblical destruction of Sodom than Wood's destruction of Bab edh-Dhra corresponds to any biblical date, high or low. If Wood keeps on insisting that I give him a specific date for the destruction of Tall el-Hammam that matches the biblical date of the destruction of Sodom, then he is condemning his own view on the subject to failure. So be it. Bab edh-Dhra was destroyed in 2350 BCE (2300 BCE for a few scholars). Wood's date for Sodom's demise is 2067 BCE (the actual date is two or three centuries later)—and he is nit-picking possible MB destruction dates at Tall el-Hammam? This is nonsense—and it is worse for Numeira, as we shall see shortly.

Wood's insistence on an earthquake is an unsupportable speculation. The biblical text uses no such language relative to Sodom's destruction (see my detailed discussions on this subject elsewhere<sup>100</sup>). As for the burning of both the cities and the surrounding area: All textual indicators thus far point to a fiery destruction not only of the cities in the area, but also of the surrounding *kikkar* itself. However, one must be cautious when assuming a massive layer of ash. In fact, the language of the biblical text is not, in the least, specific as to the nature of the conflagration other than that all the humans died, and the vegetation was destroyed.<sup>101</sup> In this context, Hebrew terms translated as “overthrew” and “swept away” are also commonly used throughout the Old Testament in contexts having nothing to do with fire from heaven, earthquakes, or any such thing.<sup>102</sup> (Again, I stress the need for proper hermeneutics.)

But consider this: the *kikkar* of the Jordan River north of the Dead Sea is the most fertile and well-watered agricultural land in the region. It is also the intersection of the area's main north/south and east/west trade routes. Why, then, would cities in surrounding, contiguous areas outside the Jordan *kikkar* continue into the Late Bronze Age,<sup>103</sup> but not on the eastern Disk itself? That no one built on that prime land for many centuries after the MB destruction signals that something dreadful occurred there to terrify the local inhabitants and subsequent generations. Ash and burned organic materials are often swept away by wind and rain over mere years or decades, but the historical memory of a fiery burst from the heavens that instantly destroyed several thriving cities would have created a local/regional lore perpetuating a sense of

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>98</sup> Collins, et al., *Tall el-Hammam...Season Two: 2006/2007*; S. Collins, “Explorations on the Eastern Jordan Disk,” *BRB* II.18 (2002); See also the references to Tall Nimrin in footnote 74.

<sup>99</sup> Collins and Moore, “Abraham...Does the Chronology Work?”

<sup>100</sup> Collins, “Terms of Destruction.”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Such as Deir ‘Alla, Nebo, Jericho, and numerous others.

dread about that location. The biblical text and the archaeology of the eastern Jordan Disk north of the Dead Sea are both commensurate with this scenario.

### ***Status Report on the SST and NST: How Each Views the Stratigraphy of Tall el-Hammam***

Wood's version of the SST must find a way to suggest that the final Middle Bronze Age stratum at Tall el-Hammam is suspect relative to the biblical date of Sodom's destruction, requiring several ancillary hypotheses:

1. Assumes that the destruction of EBA Bab edh-Dhra is somehow more acceptable than the MBA destruction of Tall el-Hammam, in spite of the fact that Abraham lived during the MBA; no justification is given for this.
2. Assumes (erroneously) that the destruction indicators at Bab edh-Dhra are more site-general than those at Tall el-Hammam, but no evidence is forthcoming.
3. Assumes that an earthquake was associated with the destruction of Sodom, but no evidence from the text exists for such an idea.

SST advocates have no grounds on which to accept the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra over the destruction indicators at Tall el-Hammam as matching the Sodom story for the simple reason that the biblical text is ambiguous regarding the nature of that destruction, except for the fact that it originated from above ("the heavens"—space) and was not an earth-based phenomenon.

By contrast, the NST need not explain away EB destructions or interpolate phenomena like earthquakes into the biblical text that are not there in the language. As for Tall el-Hammam being Sodom, it remains in the right place (northeast of the Dead Sea), in the right period (MBA), with all the right indicators (with much more, hopefully, to come from future excavations).

### **ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE FOR LOCATING SODOM**

Next, Wood calls into question my assessment of the architectural issues:

The final criterion for identifying Sodom is architecture. By this, Collins means that the site must be fortified, since "Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city" when the two angels arrived (Gn 19:1). A typical Middle Bronze Age rampart fortification system has been found at Tall el-Hammam, but again we must ask, "What is the date of this system?" Simply saying that it is Middle Bronze Age in date is not sufficient. It must correlate to the exact time of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain as recorded in Scripture.<sup>104</sup>

If a Sodom candidate site "must correlate to the exact time of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain as recorded in Scripture," then Bab edh-Dhra is out of the running. Again, whether the biblical date is 2067 BCE as Wood insists, or at least two centuries later as the vast majority of biblical evidence confirms, then Bab edh-Dhra's destruction is about 300—likely as much as 500—years too early. Either way, the southern sites—all EB—are out. I say again, any MBA date for the destruction of Tall el-Hammam matches the biblical timeframe for Sodom better than the end of the EBA (ca. 2350 BCE) as proposed by Wood.

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<sup>104</sup> Wood, "Locating Sodom" 82.

### ***Status Report on the SST and NST: How Each Views the Architecture of Tall el-Hammam***

Wood's version of the SST must criticize the existence of the massive MBA rampart system at Tall el-Hammam as commensurate with the date of Sodom by presupposing ancillary hypotheses by which to prop up the theory:

1. Assumes (almost *a priori*) that the correct date of the destruction of Sodom is 2067 BCE (when it almost certainly is not), but this cannot be sustained with evidence.
2. Assumes that it is fair to manipulate either the date of the end of the Early Bronze Age or the biblical date in order to make Bab edh-Dhra into Sodom, while requiring chronological precision between Tall el-Hammam's MBA destruction and Wood's "biblical" date for Sodom's demise, but no reason is given for this double standard.

Wood's SST is always having to invent "kinks" for the NST by insisting on ground rules to which the SST itself cannot conform.

The NST need not explain away anything in the architectural category because Tall el-Hammam conforms to all the biblical requirements.

### **THE DATE OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SOUTHERN SITES**

Finally, Wood attempts to defend his correlation between the dates for the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira and the date of the story of Abram and Lot—an exercise doomed to failure. Wood asserts:

Collins' major criticism with the Early Bronze Age sites discovered south of the Dead Sea, in addition to the fact that they do not correlate with his understanding of Genesis 13, is that they were destroyed too early. He says Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira "were both destroyed about 2350 BC, long before the time of Abraham and Lot." The destruction of these sites occurred at the end of the EB III period. Rast gives the date as 2350 BC, while the co-director of the excavations, R. Thomas Schaub, places the date slightly later at 2300 BC.<sup>105</sup>

Wood is correct that Bab edh-Dhra was destroyed toward the end of EB III, but most scholars do place the destruction at 2350 BCE. Taken at face value, either date would eliminate Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as candidates for Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Wood is so committed to the SST that he chooses to press on:

In reality, the archaeological date for the end of the EB III period cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Dating for the Bronze Age in Palestine is dependent upon synchronisms with Egyptian chronology. Unfortunately, no synchronisms have yet been found for the EB III period. There are a few correlations for the previous EB II period, suggesting that it was approximately contemporary with the Archaic Period (First and Second Dynasties) in Egypt, ca. 3100–2700 BC. The dates for the Archaic Period are only known to within 200 years, according to Kenneth Kitchen, a recognized authority on Egyptian chronology.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 83.



Notwithstanding the verity that Kitchen entirely agrees with me that Abraham fits best during the MBA, during Egypt's Twelfth or Thirteenth Dynasties or perhaps the Hyksos Period,<sup>107</sup> the fact of the matter is that neither Kitchen nor any of the other scholars cited by Wood in his article would entertain moving the end of EB III later than 2300 BCE, and most would keep it around 2350 BCE, or slightly earlier. This is so because it is not merely the Egyptian chronological uncertainties that we are dealing with here. We are dealing with a huge number of carbon-14 dates, stratigraphic comparisons site to site in the Levant, and comparative ceramic typologies. As Kitchen himself points out, it would be next to impossible to place the Genesis 12 story of Abram in Egypt—which occurs prior to the destruction of Sodom—before the 1900s BCE:

...during the Twelfth to Fifteenth Dynasties (ca. 1970-1540), the Egyptian kings (Twelfth/Thirteenth Dynasties) had an East Delta residence at Ro-waty (ruins at Ezbet-Rushdy), near Avaris (center of the god Seth), which in turn the Hyksos rulers (Fifteenth Dynasty) used as their East Delta base. Before the twentieth century B.C., no such arrangement is known... Thus the visits by an Abraham or a Jacob to a pharaoh at an East Delta palace are only feasible in Egyptian terms within circa 1970-1540....<sup>108</sup>

If correct, Kitchen has effectively eliminated Wood's 2067 BCE date for the destruction of Sodom. A. Millard is also convinced that Abraham belongs solidly in the *latter* part of the MBA based on linguistic evidence, as he expressed in recent correspondence with me:

I noticed your comment in response to Anson Rainey: 'I do like Tid'al as a Hittite—or possibly Hurrian?' He does sound Indo-European. Maybe he was the king/prince of a city-state within the Hattian or Hurrian/Mittanian sphere, and not a "national" player. The 17th century BCE is a good placement for Abraham, and similar I-E names are known in that general period.<sup>109</sup>

At this juncture, it is relevant to bring up what T. Schaub (cited profusely by Wood) has clarified to E. Cline in Prof. Cline's new book, *From Eden To Exile*:

Tom Schaub, the excavator of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, has recently determined that "short-lived carbon-14 dates we have received from Numeira place the destruction of that site around 2600 b.c., earlier than the dates we have for Bab edh-Dhra's demise." He says further, "I think this raises serious doubts about some of the biblical [Sodom and Gomorrah] identifications that have been made."<sup>110</sup>

Raising the date for Numeira's destruction causes insuperable problems for Wood's SST. Schaub is admitting that Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were not destroyed at the same time, but centuries apart. Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, and the other Cities of the Plain, were destroyed simultaneously. Numeira's date is going in the wrong direction altogether.

Wood continues:

Manfred Bietak, based on his important work at Tell el-Daba (ancient Rameses), Egypt, places the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age at ca. 1920 BC. How the intervening 800 years from the end of EB II to the beginning of Middle Bronze Age should be divided

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<sup>107</sup> Kitchen, *Reliability OT* 319

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Author's email discussion with Prof. Allan Millard, summer 2005.

<sup>110</sup> Schaub's interaction with Cline, as given in Cline, *Eden to Exile* 59.

between the EB III and EB IV periods is strictly an educated guess. The reason for the demise of the urban centers of EB III, with its concomitant destructions and site abandonments, is unknown. It is thought that EB III was the longer of the two periods because of multiple phases of building and destruction found at a number of sites, including Bab edh-Dhra. It is entirely within the realm of possibility, therefore, that the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira could have occurred at the Biblical date of 2067 BC. We shall have to wait further archaeological discoveries before an accurate archaeological date for the end of EB III can be ascertained.

There are numerous problems here. First, scholars do not always dance with Bietak when it comes to chronology, but no matter. Nothing suggested here about the end of the EBA or the beginning of the MBA can help salvage the sinking SST, because few scholars, if any, are going to step up to suggest that the end of EB III could be moved down to 2067 BCE (which in itself is still at least 215 years too early for Abram and Lot). Second, the chronology is not as uncertain as Wood presents it. In fact, based on recent assessments of the cultural continuities between the (old) EB IV and (old) MB I, both have now been combined in the new chronology into the Intermediate Bronze Age and given a date of 2350-2000 BCE, leaving the end of the EBA, and the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra, firmly at ca. 2350/2300 BCE.<sup>111</sup> Third, Wood seems oblivious to the implications of the fact that (as I mentioned previously) Bab edh-Dhra was destroyed at a time when virtually every other EBA site in the Levant was either destroyed or abandoned. The destruction of Bab edh-Dhra was part of a larger, period-ending phenomenon throughout the Near East, not an isolated, surgical destruction as required by Scripture for the Cities of the Plain. Fourth, Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were not destroyed at the same time, but centuries apart. Fifth, Wood's statements about uncertainties in dating the end of Egypt's Old Kingdom are exaggerated. The very existence of a well-documented First Intermediate Period (corresponding to the Intermediate Bronze Age in the Levant, 2350-2000 BCE) between the end of the EBA (ca. 2350 BCE) and the beginning of the MBA (ca. 2000/1950 BCE) categorically prohibits moving the end of the EBA down to 2067 BCE.

There is another insurmountable difficulty for Wood's SST in the occupational sequence at Bab edh-Dhra: the continuation of the site for perhaps 150 years after the destruction of the final fortified phase.<sup>112</sup> Genesis 19:1 requires that Sodom be fortified, with a city gate. If that is a reasonable criterion for Sodom—and the text makes it quite clear—then how, if Bab edh-Dhra is Sodom, does one explain the continuation of the site for another century and a half? If one theorizes that the latter phase was Sodom, then one is strapped with the fact that there was no fortification and gateway. It must be recognized that the Intermediate Bronze Age phase at Bab edh-Dhra is not going to go away, and that that open village does not meet the Bible's principal architectural criterion for Sodom.

Here is yet another potential obstacle for Wood's SST: If the Early Bronze Age site of et-Tell is the Ai mentioned in the story of Abraham (Gen 12:8), which Wood readily accepts,<sup>113</sup> then it would be very difficult to have Bab edh-Dhra as the city of Sodom. Why? Because, Wood

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<sup>111</sup> Ben-Tor, "Early Bronze Age"; Ahlstrom, *Ancient Palestine*.

<sup>112</sup> R. T. Schaub, "Bab edh-Dhra," *NEAEHL* vol. 1, E. Stern, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 130-136.

<sup>113</sup> A conclusion with which I heartily agree. Most scholars accept this identification.

argues, Ai (et-Tell) was destroyed before the time of Abraham<sup>114</sup>—“Ai” itself, in Hebrew, means “the ruin” or “the heap”—which matches the biblical statement that Abram “pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai [The Ruin] on the east” (Gen 12:8). This remarkable historical synchronism exists *only if* Ai (et-Tell) was actually in ruins when Abram entered Canaan during the Middle Bronze Age—also note that Bethel was occupied during the MBA<sup>115</sup> when Abram’s (EBA) Ai was “The Ruin” (the article may mean that the site was a major landmark, and had been a ruin for a long time before Abram arrived). Wood goes on to argue that the site he excavated<sup>116</sup> about one kilometer from et-Tell, Khirbet el-Maqatir, was the fortress of Ai destroyed by Joshua, a site taking its name from the nearby Ai (et-Tell) which was a huge ruin both in the days of Abram and at the time of Joshua (I concur).

But if, as Wood believes, Ai (et-Tell) was, in fact, “The Ruin” of Genesis 12:8 (and I concur), then how could Bab edh-Dhra have been Sodom, since it met its final demise at about the same time as Ai (et-Tell) at the end of EB III,<sup>117</sup> ca. 2350 BCE.<sup>118</sup> If Ai (et-Tell) was “The Ruin” when Abram entered Canaan, then it is likely that Bab edh-Dhra was also in ruins. The reverse is also

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<sup>114</sup> B. G. Wood, “The Search for Joshua’s Ai: Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir,” *BS* 12.1 (1999) 21-30. In this 1999 article, Wood makes it clear that Abram entered Canaan about 300 years after the destruction of Ai (et-Tell; destroyed toward the end of EB III), which was “The Ruin” at the time. If that is true, then Bab edh-Dhra (destroyed toward the end of EB III) was also in ruins when Abram entered Canaan, and therefore, could not be Sodom. See also B. G. Wood, “Kh. el-Maqatir 2000 Dig Report,” *BS* 13.3 (2000) 67-72. Additionally, I have had many discussions with Dr. Wood on this subject while excavating with him at Khirbet el-Maqatir.

<sup>115</sup> W. F. Albright, “The Kyle Memorial Excavation at Bethel,” *BASOR* no. 56 (1934) 2-15; W. G. Dever, “Archaeological Methods and Results: A Review of Two Recent Publications,” *Orientalia* 40 (1971) 459-471; J. L. Kelso, “Bethel,” *NEAEHL* vol. 1, E. Stern, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 192-194.

<sup>116</sup> B. G. Wood, “Khirbet el-Maqatir, 1995-1998,” *IEJ* 50.1-2 (2000) 123-130; B. G. Wood, “Khirbet el-Maqatir, 1999,” *IEJ* 50.3-4 (2000) 249-254; B. G. Wood, “Khirbet el-Maqatir, 2000,” *IEJ* 51.2 (2001) 246-252; B. G. Wood, “Kh. el-Maqatir 2000 Dig Report,” *BS* 13.3 (2000) 67-72.

<sup>117</sup> J. A. Callaway, “The 1968-1969 ‘Ai (et-Tell) Excavations,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 198 (1970) 7-31. See also J. A. Callaway and K. Schoonover, “The Early Bronze Age Citadel at Ai (et-Tell),” *BASOR* no. 207 (1972) 41-53; J. A. Callaway, “Ai (et-Tell),” *NEAEHL* vol. 1, E. Stern, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 39-45. Callaway calculated a date of 2400 BCE for the date of et-Tell’s destruction at the end of EB III, which he sub-phased as EB IIIB, Urban C. However, there is no good reason—based on ceramic assemblages or other archaeometric methodologies—that the date should not be 2350 BCE, the “average” termination of the EBA. On the other hand, Schaub’s 2350 BCE date for the destruction of Bab edh-Dhra’s final fortified occupation is simply tied to the “traditional” date for the end of EB III, which he did not sub-phase, and could just as easily be pushed back a few decades to 2400 BCE. In other words, precision between 2400 and 2350/2300 for the end of either et-Tell or Bab edh-Dhra is probably not discernable. Thus, the general conclusion is simply that both sites were destroyed toward the end of EB III.

<sup>118</sup> R. T. Schaub, “Bab edh-Dhra,” *NEAEHL* vol. 1, E. Stern, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 130-136. Even if Ai (et-Tell) was destroyed fifty years before Bab edh-Dhra, say, ca. 2400 BCE (and there is no good reason to posit that their destructions were not contemporaneous, or nearly so), Wood’s chronological scheme (down-dating the end of EB III to 2067)—and only if perfectly static with absolutely no wiggle room—could only squeak Abram into Canaan about the time of Ai’s destruction, in which case the term “The Ruin” is strange. The closer the destructions of et-Tell and Bab edh-Dhra are to each other, the worse it is for Wood’s scenario. With Schaub’s new date for the destruction of Numeira (2600 BCE), it seems that there is no guarantee that Bab edh-Dhra will not move in that direction as well. Attempting to argue that Ai (et-Tell) was destroyed any significant time before Bab edh-Dhra—which would be a requirement if Bab edh-Dhra is Sodom and et-Tell is “The Ruin” of Genesis 12—is a chronological tightrope with no room for error. There are so many caveats in this scenario that I doubt many scholars would be willing to entertain it. Of course, none of this “slicing and dicing” is necessary if Abraham is placed in the MBA where he belongs in the first place.

applicable: If Bab edh-Dhra was a thriving city (Sodom) during the time of Abram and Lot, then Ai (et-Tell) was probably a bustling city as well. Thus, Wood's insistence on Bab edh-Dhra being Sodom may require the resurrection of et-Tell during the time of Abram, thereby destroying an otherwise perfectly good historical synchronism. On the one hand, if Ai in the Abrahamic narrative was not a ruin, then it is necessary to provide an ancillary hypothesis (yet another!) to explain why a site called "The Ruin" was not, in fact, a ruin. On the other hand, if "The Ruin" was indeed a ruin, then it follows that Bab edh-Dhra was not Sodom, since both Ai (et-Tell) and Bab edh-Dhra had similar occupational histories, and were both destroyed toward the end of EB III. This is very rough sledding for Wood's SST.

In the case of Ai and Sodom, the NST needs no fixes at all. When Abram and Lot entered Canaan during the MBA, Ai (et-Tell; EBA) was a ruin, while Bethel was occupied. Sodom (Tall el-Hammam) was also a thriving concern, as were its neighboring cities and towns. No muss; no fuss.

### ***Status Report on the SST and NST: How Each Views the Date of Bab edh-Dhra's Destruction***

Wood's SST must preserve Bab edh-Dhra as Sodom at all costs, or it is finished. In order to accomplish this, several ancillary hypotheses must be forced on the issue. The SST:

1. Assumes that the chronology of Egypt is "rough" enough to give him the 300 years he needs between the end of the EBA and his 2067 BCE date for Sodom's destruction; however, no support for this is possible.
2. Assumes that T. Schaub somehow supports Wood's Sodom scenario, but this is not the case.
3. Assumes that there is some way to make the Intermediate Bronze Age (along with the First Intermediate Period in Egypt) vanish in order to end the EBA at about 2067 BCE instead of 2350/2300 BCE, but this is an impossibility.
4. Assumes that it is legitimate to ignore the destruction of both et-Tell and Bab edh-Dhra toward the end of EB III, but the subject is avoided.

When the SST faces the date of Bab edh-Dhra's destruction and the phenomena(on) that caused it, attempts to connect it to Sodom seem hopeless when both archaeology and the biblical text are taken seriously.

The NST remains quite comfortable with the biblical MBA date for the destruction of Sodom, and the corresponding MBA date for the destruction of several sites on the eastern Jordan Disk north of the Dead Sea, including the largest one, Tall el-Hammam. The NST also flows naturally with the identification of the EB site et-Tell as "The Ruin" of Genesis 12:8ff.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is little to commend the SST. The geography seems contrived. The chronology is strained at best. Historical synchronisms are difficult to identify. Elements of cultural specificity are absent. Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were typical Early Bronze Age cities that met their final demise toward the end of EB III along with every other settlement in the Levant, a scenario that is diametrically opposed to the biblical story of the surgical elimination of the Cities of the Plain during the Middle Bronze Age (time of Abram and Lot). The SST suffocates under its own weight due to the number of ancillary hypotheses required for even a modicum of believability.

By contrast, the NST meets all the biblical and archaeological criteria for Sodom, with minimal (if any) ancillary hypotheses needed to make it work. Occam's razor has revealed the deficiencies of the SST, while demonstrating the logical consistency and simplicity of the NST.