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A Late Nineteenth-Century Missionary-Scholar's Position on the Location of Sodom and Gomorrah: Excerpts from *The Land and the Book*

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Abstract:

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



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A Late Nineteenth-Century Missionary-Scholar's Position on the Location of Sodom and Gomorrah: Excerpts from *The Land and the Book*

William M. Thomson

Frontnote by Steven Collins, Dean, College of Archaeology, Trinity Southwest University

During the nineteenth century, missionary-scholar William M. Thomson spent most of his life in the Holy Land, and much of that on horseback exploring the land in minutest detail. Throughout my research on the location of the Cities of the Plain, I was unaware of Thomson's geographical work (although I was aware of his books on the Holy Land by title, because I had seen them in our school library). After presenting my research in several venues, one of my doctoral students, Carl Morgan, phoned me one day and told me about his reading of Thomson's accounts concerning the Cities of the Plain. He said that I really should read it because Thomson had come to the same conclusions I had about their location. In the process he had even arrived on the top of Tall el-Hammam, the site I've identified as Sodom itself!

Needless to say, I was quite interested. Upon reading it, I was so impressed (and encouraged!) by it that I decided to include Thomson's sections on the Cities of the Plain as an appendix in my book, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah* (TSU Press). But the *BRB* Editorial Committee also thought Thomson's work was important enough to present this excerpt as a brief paper.

So here, in his own words, is Thomson's encounter with the Cities of the Kikkar (Ciccar, as he spells it). I have also made a few comments along the way in bracketed italics.

EXCERPTS FROM WILLIAM M. THOMSON'S *THE LAND AND THE BOOK*¹

April 24th. Evening.

No one can look upon the Dead Sea without thinking of the location of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the other "cities of the plain" that were destroyed, and I should like to obtain more definite and satisfactory information on the subject than I at present possess. Since the exploration of this sea by Lieutenant Lynch, it has been supposed that the shallow part at its southern end, which is some fifteen miles long, was previously a plain, and that it was submerged at the time of the catastrophe. Admitting this to be true, how are we to understand what is said or implied—that the land there belonged to the valley of the Jordan, was watered by that river, and that therefore it was immensely fertile at the time when Lot chose it for his residence? "It was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and

¹ W.M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book: Southern Palestine and Jerusalem* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882) 371-376.

Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar” (Genesis 13:10).

It was the accepted opinion formerly that, previous to the destruction of Sodom, the Dead Sea was a fresh-water lake, and that its character was changed at that time by the obtrusion from below of rock-salt and other volcanic products, which have rendered it so extremely bitter and nauseous. The evidences of such action and obtrusion were found in the ridge of rock-salt called Jebel Usdum, at the south end of the sea, and in the presence of naphtha and bitumen in its waters. The lake, being originally shorter by the length of these plains of Sodom and Gomorrah, would necessarily rise, it was said, much higher during the rainy season than it does now; and the water being fresh, it would subside by evaporation, and perhaps by irrigation, much more rapidly than at present. The southern extension of the Dead Sea is thirteen feet deep in winter, but late in autumn it is only three, and is then forded not only by camels, but even by donkeys. The southern plain, on which the cities stood, it was supposed, was flooded by fresh water during the rise of the lake, just as the Nile floods the land of Egypt, and that when the water subsided the plain was sown, as Egypt was and is still. We have only to assume that this was actually the case at the south end of the Dead Sea, and that the inhabitants knew how to control the rising of the lake by embankments, as the Egyptians did the Nile, and the mystery about the fertility of that plain is explained.

Something like this was the former explanation; but a better acquaintance with the topography and physical characteristics of this region had led many modern writers to reject this entire hypothesis, and to locate those doomed cities at the north end of the sea instead of the south end, and the reasons for this change appear quite conclusive.

To reverse a geographical hypothesis so long and so universally entertained will require evidence and arguments very decisive indeed, and I should like to hear them.

They are partly geological, and have utterly rendered impossible the supposition that, until the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Jordan passed through the Dead Sea, then a sweet-water lake, and along Wady ‘Arabah to the Gulf of ‘Akabah. The geological changes demanded are too great to have occurred within the period of man’s residence upon the earth; and it is admitted that the Dead Sea must have been substantially what it is now from a very remote period—an inland lake, with water intensely salt and bitter. In fact, the south end of this sea belongs to Idumea, and all the fertility seen at the south-east border of it is due to brooks that come down from the mountains of Edom. The Jordan never reaches those parts, nor is there a bush or blade of grass there that owes its life to the water of that river. The south end of the Dead Sea is not “the plain of Jordan” at all, and was never so regarded or so named either in ancient or modern times.

Turning now to the Biblical narrative, let us examine some of the statements which seem to necessitate the transfer of the site of the destroyed cities to the north or north-east end of the Dead Sea. And first, it appears to be certain, from Genesis 13:1-13, that at the time of the separation between Abraham and Lot they were at or near Bethel, some twelve or fifteen miles north of Jerusalem, and sixty or seventy miles from the south end of the Dead Sea. Lot, therefore, without a miracle, could not have seen that region at all, however high he “lifted up his eyes.” The distance is too great, there is a haze over the sea which obscures the view, and, finally, high mountains on the western shore entirely intercept the prospect. And, furthermore, it is evident that the region at the south end of the sea cannot be called the

“plain of the Jordan” in any admissible sense; that plain stops at the north end. Moreover, Lot, when he separated from Abraham, is said to have “journeyed east”; whereas he must have gone to the south, if Sodom was at that end of the sea. These Biblical indications cannot be easily reconciled with the hypothesis that places those cities at the south of this sea. But as the earliest distinct geographical intimations we have which locate the catastrophe at the south end are more than two thousand years later than the catastrophe itself, it is quite possible that during the long lapse of twenty centuries the actual site may have been lost; and when left to mere conjecture, the phenomena found at the south end would best accord, it was supposed, with the account of the overthrow, such as the wonderful cliff of rock-salt called Jebel Usdum, and the dreary and hopeless desert that spreads out across the south end of the sea, while general fertility characterized the region at the north end of it.

As the opinion early prevailed that the cities were submerged at the time of the catastrophe, and lay beneath the waters of the sea, the remarkable southern extension of it, only a few feet deep, would naturally suggest the idea that there was the site of those doomed cities; and whatever may be the truth in the matter, I think no one personally acquainted with the two ends of the sea can read the many incidental references in the Bible to the site of Sodom without feeling that these allusions apply far better to the south than the north end, and, further, that those who made them, be they prophet, apostle, or historian, accepted the current tradition as to the locality, and drew their pictures from that southern landscape. This is the impression produced by such passages as Deuteronomy 29:23, Jeremiah 49:18, 2 Peter 2:6, and other similar notices, which speak of the site of Sodom as utterly waste, sown with brimstone and salt, abounding in salt-pits, the breeding-place of nettles, and a perpetual desolation. The writers, one and all, surely had their mind’s eye, not upon the plain about Jericho, with its palm-groves and balsam-bearing gardens, nor upon the acacia thickets of shittim on the east bank of the Jordan, which even now extend nearly to the shore of the sea, but upon the dismal salt desert at the south end of it.

The Biblical writers, however, refrain from giving distinct topographical indications by which we might locate the site, and the same holds true of the notices of Sodom in the Apocrypha. For though I cannot doubt that the author of the Wisdom of Solomon speaks of the south end, not the north, as “the waste land that smoketh, with plants bearing fruit that never come to ripeness, and a standing pillar of salt” (Wisdom 10:7), yet he does not say so. Josephus, also, says that “there are still the remainders of that divine fire, and traces of the five cities are still to be seen, as well as the ashes growing in their fruits. Which fruits have a color as if they were fit to be eaten, but if you pluck them with your hands, they dissolve into smoke and ashes,” with a good deal of other extravagances about this sea and country which you will find in the fourth book of his Wars, at the end of the eighth chapter. Nor can there be a question as to the region which he had in view. We need not wonder, therefore, that all subsequent authors, down to Robinson, Lynch, Stanley, De Saulcy, and others, take for granted that the overthrown cities were located at the south end of the Dead Sea; and, indeed, the attempt to set aside such a tradition as this will be regarded by many as a case of unsustained critical presumption.

In conclusion, we must still be allowed to doubt that the submergence of the entire Lessan [Lisan], at the time of the catastrophe, is a geological impossibility. Phenomena somewhat

similar have occurred elsewhere within historic times, and the same is true in regard to the elevation of such cliffs as Jebel Usdum. Monte Nuova, north-west of Baiae, near Naples, was thrown up in a night, only a few hundred years ago, and there it stands as firmly as Jebel Usdum, and much higher.

It has been suggested that the geographical indications in Genesis may be explained as follows: The Hebrew word rendered plain in chapter 13:10-12, 19:17,25,28, is *ciccar* [*kikkar*], not the ordinary name for a level plain, but is an indefinite term, radically having reference to something circular, and may have then been a technical term for the whole region around this sea, both north and south. And it seems to have been actually thus employed in Deuteronomy 34:3, in describing the extent of the vision of Moses from the top of Pisgah over the Promised Land. He saw the south, and the *ciccar* of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm-trees, unto Zoar. Now, if Zoar was at the north end of the Dead Sea, it would be in the immediate vicinity of Jericho, almost at the foot of Pisgah, and superfluous to say that Moses saw it; but if it was at the other end of that sea, it would imply a large extension of the survey in that direction.

Lot went east from Bethel to this *ciccar*, which he would naturally do in descending into “the plain of Jordan.” How far he travelled in it before he came to Sodom, and in what direction, are details not mentioned. It is worth while, in this connection, to allude to a formula often employed by writers on this country, “the valley of the Jordan.” It holds within its compass the three lakes—Huleh, Tiberias, and the Dead Sea. *Ciccar* may have had an equally extended application, and hence Lot would have been in the *ciccar*, though his residence was at the south end of the sea.

In Genesis 13:10, it is stated that, “before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah,” the plain was “as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar.” Does not this imply that a terrible change had been effected by the catastrophe itself?

That would be true in any case, without reference to how it occurred; and you must remember that nowhere is there the slightest intimation that those cities were submerged. The agent employed in their destruction was not water, but its opposite—fire. I suppose that they were agricultural towns of no great size, built of unburnt brick, probably, and other materials still more perishable; and after the conflagration they must have presented an appalling spectacle of utter devastation— “the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:28).

If at this end of the sea, and a few miles from Jericho, how do you account for the entire disappearance of the ruins?

There was but little left to disappear, and the debris of the ruins would have long since been buried up by the shifting sand, too deep for their sites to be now visible. I am inclined to locate all those doomed cities on the other side of the Jordan, near the north-east corner of the Dead Sea. There is plenty of room for them there, and, curiously enough, in that vicinity are to be found the proper number of tells [talls], or earth-mounds, required for the sites of the lost cities. Lot, we know, was on the east side of the Jordan after the catastrophe, and the little city Zoar to which he fled must have been on that side also; for he went up into the mountain above it, where his descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites, were found in succeeding times. We will visit that region hereafter, and examine those tells on the spot.

THOMPSON'S DESCRIPTION OF THE KIKKAR AND TALL EL-HAMMAM

[Note by S. Collins: The following excerpt is found on pages 668-670 of Thompson's volume, *The Land and the Book: Lebanon, Damascus, and Beyond Jordan*.² I am particularly interested in his description of Tall el-Hammam, since I am suggesting it as the most likely candidate for Sodom. Indeed, Thompson recognized the strategic position of the site, even though he did not comprehend the actual size of it. Here are his observations:]

A great change has come upon this region since the Hebrew host passed this way down to their camping-ground on the acacia meadow, or Abel-shittim... Then all these valleys and hills must have been alive with "much cattle," and thousands of men, women, and children must have crowded every practicable pathway down to the "plains of Moab."... This [the pathway from the Jordanian highlands north of Mt. Nebo down onto the *kikkar* via the rock spur leading down along the Wadi Kefrein to Tall el-Hammam] is... not the only way from the high plateau of Moab to the Jordan, but it is the easiest one... The road now winds down this narrow ridge with profound ravines on either side, all of which are dry, rocky, and impracticable.

The Hebrews must have had an extensive view of the plain from many places along this descent from the plateau of Moab.

Let us turn aside and rest a while under the shadow of that great rock while we contemplate this glorious prospect. We can see the entire plain of Abel-shittim, the Jordan Valley, and the endlessly diversified hills of Judea, the Dead Sea, and every tell upon "the plains of Moab" from Tell Suweimeh [Khirbet Sweimeh] on the south to Tell Nimrin [Tall Nimrim] on the north. The entire western face of these Moabite mountains, from es Salt to "the mountain of Nebo," is drained by a number of wadies, all of which debouch on to Ghôr es Seisabân, as "the acacia meadow," or Abel-shittim, is now called.

Beginning at the south, the principal ones are Wady 'Ayûn Mûsa under Nebo, then Wady Hesbân, and beyond it Wady Kefrein and Wady Sha'ib with its little river, which flows down from es Salt, past Tell Nimrin, and irrigates that part of the plain. The stream from Kefrein rises in the mountains east of 'Arâk el Emir, near a ruin called Khirbet Sâr, and enters the plain between Tell Kefrein [Tall Kefrein] on the north and Tell el Hammâm [Tall el-Hammam] on the south. The little stream from 'Ain Hesbân comes from Wady Hesbân and flows past and to the north of Tell Ektanu [Tall Iktanu] and Tell er Râmeh [Tall Rama], and the waters from 'Ayûn Mûsa flow down the valley of the same name and join the stream of Wady Jerifeh. After reaching the plain of Abel-shittim all those streams from the different wadies cut their own deep and narrow channels westward to the Jordan.

The principal tells on the plain of Abel-shittim, commencing at the southern end and proceeding northward, are Tell es Suweimeh,... Tell Ektanu,... Tell er Râmeh,... Tell esh Shaghûr,... Tell el Hammâm,... Tell Kefrein,... and Tell Nimrin...

We have now reached Tell el Hammâm, the mound of the bath [or pigeons], at the foot of the mountain. I spent two nights near it, encamped on the west bank of this pretty little stream from Wady Kefrein, and I passed the intervening day wandering about this beautiful plain and exploring the surrounding hills. Tell el Hammâm is a high natural mound at the south-eastern

² W.M. Thompson, *The Land and the Book: Lebanon, Damascus, and Beyond Jordan* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1885) 668-70.

end of the plain, and commands a wide view over it to the south and west, and the stream from Wady Kefrein flows past its north-western base. No part of the tall is artificial except the top, which is covered with the debris of ancient buildings which may be of any age [*Actually, only the eastern half of the mound is comprised of a natural hill, which, moving west, disappears into and under the artificial mound. The artificial (occupational debris) upper tall is about 150 meters wide, north to south, and about 350 meters long, east to west. Thompson was, I think, unaware of the extent of the occupational ruins. He also seems to have been unaware of the circular lower tall extending south, north and mostly west, and measuring over 500 meters in diameter. Whatever buildings were still visible in the late nineteenth century have long since crumbled into piles of stones. The top of Tall el-Hammam was used during the Ottoman period, and in subsequent history, as a military outpost, and is gouged by large trenches. However, our sherding pretty well confirms that the surface-level structures seen by Thompson, less visible today, date to the second half (or so) of the Iron Age. So, in fact, most of Tall el-Hammam was artificially laid down by multiple occupations.*] The summit appears to have been surrounded with a wall, and if it was well fortified it would command the entrance into the mountains up Wady Kefrein...

Tall el Hammâm is so called from some warm sulfur springs near the base of it on the south-west. They form a marsh covered with bushes and alive with frogs [*and so it is today; the Roman bath complex is near this spring*]. Baths appear to have been built close by, but all has been deserted for ages, no one knows how many [*Thompson goes on to describe an aqueduct leading from Wadi Kefrein to the bath area, but it is not presently visible (as of October 2005)*].