

# Tall el-Hammam Is Not Sodom

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# TALL EL-HAMMAM IS NOT SODOM

By Clyde E. Billington, Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION

A line in an old Stuart Hamlin song says: "I overlooked an orchid while searching for a rose." Its relevance to the search for Sodom will be disclosed below.

This past November my friend Steve Collins gave a presentation on Tall el-Hammam at the annual meeting of the Near East Archaeological Society [NEAS] in San Francisco. Steve has repeatedly claimed in his NEAS presentations for several years that Tall el-Hammam, a site he is excavating in Jordan, is the biblical city of Sodom. I have just as consistently argued that Tall el-Hammam is not Sodom.

Before beginning my criticism of Steve's position on the location of Sodom, let me express my appreciation for his work in archaeology. He is one of the most dynamic archaeologists that I have ever met and his energy level would wear out the Energizer Bunny. I also consider Steve Collins a personal friend.

## THE LOCATION OF TALL EL-HAMMAM

Tall el-Hammam is located about five miles northeast of the site where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, beside an ancient road. This east-west road led from the north-south King's Highway across a ford of the Jordan River to Jericho. This is the ford of the Jordan that Joshua and the Israelites used. Tall el-Hammam's location is key to its proper identification.

I believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were located at the southern end of the Dead Sea and not the northern end. Steve argues that a southern Sodom cannot be seen from Bethel—where Genesis 13 reports that Abraham and Lot decided to split into two groups. Tall el-Hammam *can* be seen from Bethel.

However, Genesis 13:10 does not state that Abraham and Lot saw Sodom from Bethel but rather it says that they saw "all the valley of the Jordan." Genesis 13:12 then states: "Lot settled in the **cities of the valley** (Hebrew: **kikkar**), and moved his tents as far as Sodom." It should be noted that Lot first pitched his tents near cities other than Sodom and then moved to Sodom. The phrase "as far as Sodom" suggests that Sodom was not located close to the "cities of the **kikkar**" at the northern end of the Dead Sea.

Lot's movements from city to city along the Jordan River and the Dead Sea with his tents and flocks fit well with what is known from ancient sources. There was a symbiotic relationship between ancient farmers and shepherders. After grain crops were harvested, farmers allowed shepherders to graze their animals on the stubble left in the fields. This benefitted the farmers in two ways, first by helping to clear the fields for replanting and second by providing natural fertilizer for next year's grain crops.

Shepherders would move their flocks from one farmer's field to another, and this is exactly what the Bible says Lot was doing. Lot was grazing his animals on farmers' fields from the Jordan Valley in the north to the city of Sodom in the south. Genesis 13:18 relates that Abraham himself moved south from Bethel to the oaks of Mamre near Hebron. Both Lot and Abraham seem to have moved their flocks south from Bethel; Lot went to Sodom and Abraham went to the oaks of Mamre.

Later, when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot had stopped traveling with his flocks and living in tents. Genesis 19:2-11 relates that Lot was living in a house in Sodom. Lot had become wealthy enough to give up the hard life of a nomadic shepherd. In contrast, Genesis 18:1-2 relates that Abraham continued to dwell in a tent near his flocks at Mamre.

## THE LOCATION OF SODOM

First among my reasons to believe that Sodom was located at the southern end of the Dead Sea is Genesis 14:3, which states that Sodom and Gomorrah were located "**in the valley (Hebrew: "emeq") of Siddim, that is the Salt Sea.**" Genesis places Sodom in the "valley of Siddim" and not in the "valley of the Jordan." Note the phrase: "that is the Salt Sea." The biblical connection of Sodom with the Dead Sea does not fit well with Tall el-Hammam, which is located five miles northeast of the Dead Sea.

Second, Genesis 14:10 states that the "valley of Siddim" was full of tar (Hebrew: "chemer") pits. There are no tar pits at Tall el-Hammam. On the other hand, globs of tar have in past centuries frequently risen to the surface at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Ancient sources mention these globs of tar and state that they were collected by the locals and sold; some into Egypt where the tar was at times smeared on wrapped mummies to seal and protect them. About 40 years ago, modern Israeli oil drillers reported finding a layer of oil sand at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Sodom's tar was unquestionably petroleum based. This can be seen in Exodus 2:3 which has the mother of baby Moses waterproofing his basket with "tar (Heb. "chemar" — probably imported from the Dead Sea) and pitch" before placing it in the Nile River.

Third, the American archaeologists Rast and Schaub several decades ago excavated villages near the southern end of the Dead Sea. While Steve Collins rejects this evidence, these villages were all destroyed by a "fiery conflagration" at the same time. The largest of these villages was Bab edh Dhra, which was only about 10 acres. I do not believe that any of these villages were Sodom or Gomorrah, but they were almost certainly ancillary villages that belonged to Sodom, Gomorrah, and also to the other three cities mentioned in the Genesis account. It is true that Rast and Schaub dated these villages to ca. 2350-2300 BC, and it is also true that Abraham and Lot date closer to ca. 2100 BC, but this dating discrepancy can be easily explained, i.e. not all Early Bronze Age cities fell at the same time in Canaan as is generally assumed.

Fourth, Rast and Schaub found two massive cemeteries — later a third was also discovered — near the southern end of the Dead Sea. They estimated that over a million people had been buried in these cemeteries over a period of about 1,000 years. These are the largest ancient cemeteries ever discovered in the Middle East. The cemeteries clearly indicate that at one time there were large cities located nearby. This fits well with the Genesis story which indicates that a large allied army from southern Mesopotamia attacked Sodom and Gomorrah just prior to their destruction. Incidentally, biological materials found in these tombs provide strong proof that the area at the south end of the Dead Sea was once lush and well-watered.

And fifth, tradition has for centuries placed Sodom and Gomorrah somewhere at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Zoar—a city allied with Sodom—is located at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Zoar was the city to which Lot fled at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The famous cave of Lot has also been traditionally located at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Tradition can be wrong, but it should only be ignored when there is irrefutable evidence to the contrary.

#### THE HEBREW WORD KIKKAR

Steve Collins frequently cites the Hebrew word “kikkar” in the phrase “valley (kikkar) of the Jordan.” It is true that Sodom and Gomorrah are said in Genesis 19 to be on a “kikkar” which some English translations render as “plain” and others as “valley.” Steve assumes that this kikkar of Sodom and Gomorrah is the same as the kikkar of the Jordan. However, kikkar is also used for other locations; for example note the “kikkar of Jerusalem” which is mentioned in Neh. 12:28.

Genesis 19:28 states that, at the time of their destruction, Abraham: “looked down towards Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley /kikkar.” Abraham was living near Hebron when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and the shortest route from Hebron to the Dead Sea comes out on the Dead Sea near Ein Gedi. From this location Abraham could probably see the general areas of both the southern and northern ends of the Dead Sea, but his best view would have been the general area of Bab edh Dhra on the Lisan Peninsula, a village with proven evidence of a massive fiery destruction.

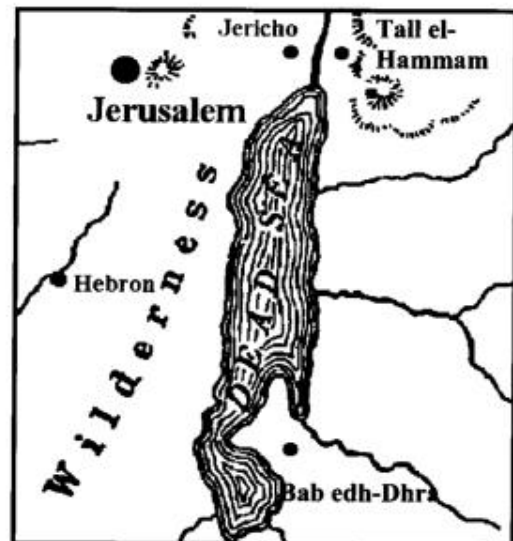
#### TALL EL-HAMMAM IS NOT SODOM

I believe that Steve Collins’s own excavations at Tall el-Hammam are disproving his theory that it is the site of ancient Sodom. While he has found “ash and destruction layers,” he has not found evidence that a massive fiery conflagration destroyed the entire site of Tall el-Hammam and its surrounding villages at the same time. His evidence indicates that military conquest ended the Middle Bronze Age city of Tall el-Hammam.

Steve has himself reported finding sling stones and other evidence of a military conquest. He has suggested that this military conquest is evidence of the attack on Sodom and Gomorrah that was made by the coalition of four kings from southern Mesopotamia which is mentioned in Genesis 14. But, if Tall el-Hammam is Sodom, there should be a thick sulfuric/ brimstone burn layer over the entire site, and this burn layer should be on top of the evidence of military conquest.

Steve Collins has also found pottery at Tall el-Hammam which he himself dated in his 2011 NEAS presentation ca. 1650 BC and which he also said matches MB2 pottery found in the destroyed city of Jericho IV. Bryant Wood has proven with pottery, Egyptian scarabs, and carbon 14 that the destruction of Jericho IV dates to ca. 1400 BC. Steve has apparently misdated the military destruction layer at Tall el-Hammam by 250 years.

Not only does Steve’s date of 1650 BC for the destruction of Middle Bronze Age Tall el-Hammam not match the archaeological evidence at Jericho IV—which unquestionably dates to ca. 1400 BC—but it also forces him to re-date Abraham and Lot to 1650 BC. To be blunt, 1650 BC is a biblically impossible date for Abraham and Lot. If Steve is correct and if Tall el-Hammam is Sodom, then the chronologies given in the Old Testament would have to be not just revised, but totally trashed.



#### WHAT WAS THE ANCIENT NAME OF TALL EL-HAMMAM?

Tall el-Hammam was clearly once a very large and important city. And, as was noted above, Tall el-Hammam is located along the ancient road that the Israelites traveled while moving west from the King’s Highway to the “plains of Moab.” Numbers 22:1 places the “plains of Moab” east of the Jordan River “opposite” the city of Jericho. Tall el-Hammam is also located “opposite” the city of Jericho.

Since the Israelites passed right by Tall el-Hammam, it is a site that should be mentioned in the Old Testament. Moses kept good records of the travels of the Israelites during the Exodus. Why does he not mention Sodom, if Tall el-Hammam was Sodom?

I believe that the archaeological and biblical evidence strongly indicates that Tall el-Hammam is the ancient Bronze Age city of Heshbon, the capital city of the Amorite King Sihon who was defeated by none other than Moses himself. In searching for the rose of Sodom, Steve Collins has overlooked the orchid of Old Testament Heshbon. While not as famous as Sodom, in many ways, Old Testament Heshbon is probably even more significant for Biblical Archaeology than is Sodom.

Admittedly there is a problem in my identification of Tall el-Hammam with Heshbon. Almost any map of the Old Testament world places Heshbon at the site where the road eastward from Jericho connects with the King’s Highway; about 12 miles directly to the east of Tall el-Hammam. For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the Heshbon at the intersection with the King’s Highway as “eastern Heshbon” and Tall el-Hammam in the Jordan Valley as “western Heshbon.” I believe that there were two Heshbons.

As archaeologist Efrain Velazquez II pointed out in his 2011 presentation at NEAS, the famous Seventh Day Adventist archaeologist Siegfried Horn excavated extensively at eastern Heshbon for years, but did not find any archaeological strata dating earlier than the Iron Age. There is no doubt that eastern Heshbon was called Heshbon/Esbus in the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Muslim Periods, but it cannot be the Heshbon mentioned in the Old Testament since it clearly is not old enough. Seventh Day Adventist archaeologists are now

looking at other sites near eastern Heshbon in hopes of finding Sihon's Heshbon.

I believe that Tall el-Hammam—western Heshbon—was the original city of Heshbon that was captured by Moses, and that eastern Heshbon was built in the Iron Age and named after it. As nearly all archaeologists know, it was not unusual for the names of cities to move from site to site in the ancient world. This is even true for the modern world. Note that there are cities named after the original city of Rochester in England to be found in New York, Michigan, Minnesota, and Oregon.

It is even possible that the families of the two and a half tribes who remained east of the Jordan River stayed in fortified Heshbon/Tall el-Hammam for protection while most of their men went on to fight in Canaan as they had promised Moses. However, the ancient Israelites, who were animal herders, had no long-term need for a large, heavily fortified city like Heshbon/Tall el-Hammam and in time abandoned it. Steve Collins has found only minimal Iron Age evidence from the Israelite period at Tall Hammam.

Nearly everything that Steve Collins and his archaeological team have found at Tall el-Hammam fits perfectly with biblical Heshbon. The Israelites under Moses and Joshua would have had to pass within meters of Tall el-Hammam and through its territory in order to move west from the King's Highway to the plains of Moab. The plains of Moab are located on the eastern side of the Jordan River "opposite Jericho" (Num. 31:12), and were almost certainly once controlled by the nearby city of Tall el-Hammam.

Second, the Israelites could not have camped on the plains of Moab unless Tall el-Hammam had either consented or been neutralized militarily. Numbers 21:23-24 indicates that the Amorite King Sihon foolishly led his army out of his fortified capital Heshbon to attack the Israelites on open ground at Jahaz. Sihon's defeat at Jahaz allowed the Israelites to easily take the weakly-defended western Heshbon and other Amorite cities belonging to it. Numbers 21:30 has the Israelites stating in a proverb: "*But we have cast them down, Heshbon is ruined as far as Dibon, Then we have laid waste even to Hophah, Which reaches to Medeba*" [ASV]. The people of Jericho appear to have learned from Sihon's mistake since they decided to use their army to defend its walls rather than to risk a confrontation with the Israelites on open ground. But God foiled their plans by causing the walls of Jericho to fall down before Joshua.

Third, according to Steve Collins himself, the terminal Middle Bronze Age 2 pottery which his team has found at Tall el-Hammam matches pottery at Jericho IV. This indicates that Tall el-Hammam fell at the same time as Jericho IV. If Jericho IV fell to Joshua—then Tall el-Hammam must be the city of Heshbon that fell to Moses.

And fourth, Mount Nebo, from which Moses saw the Promised Land, is located less than two miles southeast of Tall el-Hammam. To reach Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab, Moses would have journeyed right past Tall el-Hammam. Moses' journey to Mount Nebo gives proof that the Israelites had gained control over the entire area north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River. Steve Collins will probably argue that, since Tall el-Hammam was Sodom, it was in a state of destruction when Moses conquered the entire area of the "Kikkar of the Jordan." But I believe that identifying Tall el-Hammam with Sihon's capital city of Heshbon best fits both the biblical and archaeological evidence.

## CONCLUSION

Which of us is correct about Tall el-Hammam? I think that Steve himself already has the answer to this question in his possession. Steve has reported in his NEAS presentations that he has found a number of Egyptian scarabs.

The backs of ancient scarabs were carved in the form of a sacred dung beetle, while their stomachs were often inscribed with the names of Egyptian pharaohs. The names of these pharaohs can be easily identified and very accurately dated by Egyptologists. Steve has stated that he has not yet had an Egyptologist date these scarabs. He should do so immediately.

Let me make a prediction. Steve will find that some of his Egyptian scarabs from Tall el-Hammam date to the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in the New Kingdom Period and more specifically to the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC. If the scarabs date to the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC, then Tall el-Hammam cannot be Sodom.

Heshbon is at least as important an archaeological site as Sodom, and probably even more significant. I consider Tall el-Hammam to be one of the most significant excavations—if not the most significant—in Biblical Archaeology that is now taking place in the Middle East; it is even more significant than Hazor and Gezer. Only Mazar's excavations at the City of David in Jerusalem can rival it.

Since Sihon was an Amorite and since the Amorites under Hammurabi once ruled Babylon, Sihon and the Amorites at Heshbon probably kept records in the Akkadian language on clay tablets. It is likely that Sihon's palace and his royal diplomatic archive are located in the immediate area of the main gate. If the royal archive of Heshbon can be found, it will be one of the greatest discoveries ever made in Biblical Archaeology.