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Steven Collins

Abstract:

Zoar is typically located near the southern tip of the Dead Sea. However, a careful analysis of key biblical passages signals that it must be outside the territories of Moab and Edom, which makes the southern Dead Sea location questionable. Zoar is designated as the southern boundary of the Reuben tribal allotment, and, therefore, should be placed somewhere near the Arnon Gorge, north of the Moabite Kingdom boundary.



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Trinity Southwest University (Attn: BRB)
P.O. Box 91593, Albuquerque, NM 87199 USA

Rethinking the Location of Zoar: An Exercise in Biblical Geography

Steven Collins

Dean, College of Archaeology, Trinity Southwest University;
Director, Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project, Jordan

The traditional location of biblical Zoar at es-Safi near the southern tip of the Dead Sea is at least casually accepted by most biblical scholars.¹ That location has, in turn, influenced the placement of the Cities of the Plain, including the infamous city of Sodom. The location of Zoar is one of the key components of the theory of a southern Dead Sea location for Sodom and Gomorrah, and is consistently used as an argument against locating the Cities of the Plain north of the Dead Sea, as I and others have proposed.² However, relative to the issue of Zoar's location, there is a biblical passage that may prove definitive in eliminating the southern end of the Dead Sea as a viable area for Zoar: Deuteronomy 34:1-4. A straightforward analysis³ of the passage suggests

¹ Most biblical resources such as Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, as well as commentaries, locate Zoar toward the southern end of the Dead Sea, even if they do not associate it with es-Safi. However, there are exceptions, such as R. D. Culver's entry on Zoar in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Culver reasons that Zoar is on or adjacent to the eastern Jordan Disk opposite Jericho.

² For sources using the far southern location of Zoar to influence their placement of the Cities of the Plain see 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; 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; 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; B.G. Wood, "Sodom and Gomorrah Update," *BS* 12 (1983) 22-33; 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; D. Neev and K.O. Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jericho: Geological, Climatological, and Archaeological Background* (New York: Oxford University, 1995); and B.G. Wood, "The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah," *BS* 12.3 (1999) 67-80. 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*. 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 is often lacking in 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.

³ I would be remiss if I failed to point out that many scholars doubt the credibility of the geographical "lay of the land" in the "Mosaic" literature. In a recent email interaction with T. Schaub, one of the principal excavators of Bab edh-Dhra', he offered to me the following suggestion:

I am wary of using the 'geographical' references in stories about Moses and Lot—given the nature of the stories and the difficulty in dating them. It seems to me the best approach is to use the references in the Prophets which are more reliable for dating. Here we seem to have two separate traditions, one about Admah and Zeboiim for the northern prophets and another about Sodom and Gomorrah for the southern prophets. Perhaps there were two traditions about destroyed cities? Another approach would be to seek the locale which was involved in the passing on of the traditions. I have always thought Hebron could be a likely place for the southern traditions. All very difficult to prove.

My response to Schaub's comment was as follows: "Why would the 'Yahwist's' geography necessarily be suspect, regardless of the time of writing? Finkelstein and Na'aman admit that the geographies of Hexateuchal stories probably accommodate real, known geography from the writers' experiences. Isn't it reasonable that the stories of Abram and Lot are "wrapped around" a real-world geography? Linguistically, geographical referents form powerful mental frameworks, and are some of the most

that Zoar marks the southern border of the Israelite Reuben allotment at the Arnon River. If Zoar was indeed located just north of the Arnon in the territory of Reuben, then the Cities of the Plain could only be located north of the Dead Sea on the eastern Jordan Disk.⁴

According to Deuteronomy 34:1-4, Moses traveled "from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho" (v. 1). From that location overlooking the Kikkar (disk) of the southern Jordan Valley, "Yahweh showed him all the land" (v. 1). What Moses saw was "the land which [Yahweh] swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants...'" (v. 4). This language is explicit in assigning all of the geographical areas mentioned in the passage to the Israelites as their Promised Land. In the Hebrew text, the description of "the land which I swore" is segmented into six grammatical constructions using the objective particle **אֵת**, i.e., six direct objects. The five direct objects following the first are introduced by a waw conjunctive, **וְאֵת**. Each of these six direct objects identifies a geographical area defining the parameters of the contiguous Israelite tribal allotments, the land promised by Yahweh. Three of these geographical units include an additional geographical parameter introduced by the preposition **עַד**, generally translated "to," "unto," or "as far as."

The six geographical areas shown to Moses comprise a sweeping panorama of the Promised Land, moving in a counterclockwise direction from Pisgah northward through the Transjordan, across to the Cisjordan north of Lake Kinneret, then southward through the Cisjordan to the Negev, then northward once again to the southern Jordan Valley below Pisgah. The panorama begins and ends at Pisgah, slightly north of Mt. Nebo. Following the text of Deuteronomy 34:1-3, the panoramic sweep of the Promised Land's six-part geography looks like this, direct object by direct object (my translation):

"...Yahweh showed him the whole land,"

1. "(אֵת-) the Gilead unto (עַד) Dan"
2. "and (וְאֵת) all of Naphtali"
3. "and (וְאֵת) [the] land of Ephraim and Manasseh"
4. "and (וְאֵת) all of [the] land of Judah unto (עַד) the western sea"
5. "and (וְאֵת) the Negev"
6. "and (וְאֵת) the Kikkar of the Valley of Jericho, City of Palms, unto (עַד) Zoar"

Notice that there is a large geographical discontinuity from direct object five, "the Negev," to direct object six, "the Kikkar of the Valley of Jericho...unto Zoar." The writer jumps from the Negev all the way to the southern Jordan Valley, with the additional parameter "unto (עַד) Zoar." What is the reason for this large geographical discontinuity? When one remembers the promises regarding the descendents of Esau (the Edomites) and Lot (the Moabites), the answer is clear, and reflected on all Bible maps: Edom and Moab were off-limits to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 2:4-5, 9). Looking at any good map of the Israelite tribal allotments, "the Negev" (direct object five) represents the allotment to Simeon. The area represented by direct object six, "the Kikkar of

tenacious elements of historical narrative and myth." I cannot imagine a good argument in favor of minimizing the historical value of Hexateuchal geography that would hold up to rigorous scrutiny. Pitting date of writing against geographical accuracy seems to me a non sequitur.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the northern Kikkar theory for the location of Sodom see S. Collins, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah* (Albuquerque: Trinity Southwest University Press, 2002-2006).

the Valley of Jericho...unto Zoar," is none other than the allotment to the tribe of Reuben, the southern extent of which was the Arnon River, the border of Moab.

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?

All 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. 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 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.

Zoar, of course, means "small, insignificant." On this basis I have always suggested that it probably had little or no permanent architecture in the Bronze Age, and was substantially a "tent city" near a perennial water source such as a spring or surface flow.⁵ Such a town may have served as a watering center, an oasis stop-over and safe haven for streams of caravans, diplomatic entourages, and nomads coursing back and forth between Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Transjordan Levant. Perhaps the location was controlled ("ruled") by a tribal chieftain ("king," Genesis 14:2) who retained a troop of fighting men (Genesis 14:1-9) that guarded their prosperous little caravan way-station from attack, and otherwise provided protection—not without cost!—for travelers moving through the eastern Dead Sea corridor. If Zoar (also called Bela, Genesis 14:2, 8) was "the town in the middle of the [Arnon] gorge," then, being comprised mainly of tents, it would have been able to remain close to the Arnon River as the seasonal water flow fluctuated between frequent raging torrents in the winter and early spring, and a steady trickle during the late summer and fall. A tent city would be able to make progressive location adjustments away from the high water flows, but then move closer to the river as its flow dwindled during the hotter months. Thus, such a small town, a Zoar, would not have been "on the rim of the Arnon Gorge" as was Aroer, but would have been "in the middle" of the Wadi Arnon near the water, the source of their livelihood. For the length of the Dead Sea's eastern shore, the Arnon River was the only perennial water source on the north/south trade route, making a caravan watering center at that location an almost guaranteed success. Logically, coming from Egypt, Edom or Moab, a Zoar (Bela) thus situated would have served as the gateway to the Cities of the Plain to the north. All this makes perfect sense out of the biblical data regarding Zoar.

Regardless of whether or not Zoar was "the town in the middle of the [Arnon] gorge," the fact that it is listed with the geographical areas and locations comprising the Israelite Promised Land in Deuteronomy 34:1-4—confirmed by the configuration of the Reubenite territory in Joshua 13:9-10 as depicted on virtually every Bible map in existence—places Zoar at the southernmost

⁵ Collins, *Sodom and Gomorrah* 15.

border of the Israelites in the Transjordan—the Arnon River. The entire region south and southeast of the Dead Sea from below the Arnon and west to the Negev was occupied by Moab and Edom, and was not a part of the land promised to the Israelites. The traditional site of Zoar (es-Safi) is in the far southern part of the Moabite Kingdom, perhaps in Edom, far from Israelite territory.

R. D. Culver's comments about the location of Zoar are instructive in light of what I have stated above:

There are...serious objections to [the southern Dead Sea] view. The Bible locates Zoar specifically at an extremity of the "Plain...the valley of Jericho" in the recital of the dimension of the Promised Land (Deut 34:3). This most naturally would be on the eastern edge of the Jordan Valley near the N end of the Dead Sea, the opposite end from the "traditional" site esp. considering that Mt. Nebo (or Pisgah) from which Moses espied the place is directly overlooking a plain which has Jericho in plain view at its western edge. Further, it is difficult to understand the purpose of the expedition to invade cities so remote, and inaccessible as the S end of the Dead Sea, by armies from Mesopotamia (Gen 14). How would Moses have seen the area at the S end of the Dead Sea from Mt. Nebo in Moab opposite Jericho (Deut 34:1, cf. v. 3), for it is cut off from view by heights intervening? The geographical notations in connection with Lot's choice of a city of the "Plain of Jordan" (Gen 13:10-12, cf. 3, 4) seem clearly to indicate the valley of Jordan opposite Bethel and Ai, fifty or sixty m. N of the S end of the Dead Sea. Against the scholarship and traditions regarding the location of Zoar and the rest of the "Pentapolis" this writer holds that the sense of the Biblical texts is contrary.⁶

Although I do not agree with every detail of Culver's analysis, I think he is entirely correct in linking Zoar with the geographical unit including "the Kikkar of the valley of Jericho." That Zoar is within the borders of the land promised to the Israelites is difficult to refute. Additionally, it seems to me that the *only* thing standing in favor of a far southern Zoar is the relatively inconsequential tradition represented by the Madaba Map from the sixth century CE.⁷ All other lines of evidence, both textual/geographical and archaeological, point to a Zoar at the Arnon border of Moab.

The fact that there is nothing archaeological to commend the traditional location of Zoar, except the Madaba Map, ought to give biblical cartographers pause in the light of Deuteronomy 34:1-4 as supported by Joshua 13:9-10. It is reasonable, even obvious, that the sixth direct object in Deuteronomy 34:3, "the Kikkar of the Valley of Jericho...unto Zoar," marks the north-to-south extent of the Reuben allotment north of Moab. Given this placement of Zoar on the north side of the Arnon River, the location of the Cities of the Plain, including Sodom, would be still further to the north. The fact that the phrases "Kikkar of the Valley of Jericho" in Deuteronomy 34:3 and "Kikkar of the Jordan [River]" in Genesis 13:10 both use the Hebrew term *kikkar* (disk, circle), as does the phrase "Cities of the Plain (*kikkar*)," is a strong indicator that they refer to one and the same geographical area—the disk-like plain of the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea (recall that Lot could see the whole Kikkar of the Jordan from the area of Bethel/Ai on

⁶ R. D. Culver, "Zoar," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

⁷ The Byzantines had no way to confirm the location of Zoar, but only their own traditions. They likely upheld traditional lore, locating Zoar at the southern end of the Dead Sea because of the desolate nature of the area—it "looked" like a place God might have destroyed!

the highlands approximately 13 kilometers west-northwest of, and overlooking, Jericho).⁸ Archaeological evidence from the eastern Jordan Disk (Kikkar), strongly supports that area as the correct location of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim.⁹ Locating Zoar at the Arnon River would make this an irresistible fact, since the Cities of the Plain were north of Zoar. Deuteronomy 34:1-4 and Joshua 13:9-10 seem to support the Zoar/Arnon link, and casts serious doubt on a southern Dead Sea Zoar.

⁸ See my detailed discussion in Collins, *Sodom and Gomorrah*.

⁹ A string of Bronze Age sites exists on the eastern Kikkar north of the Dead Sea opposite Jericho. I have suggested that the largest of these sites, Tall el-Hammam, is the city of Sodom, founded in the Early Bronze Age (if not earlier), destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, and not reoccupied for over five centuries. As Director of The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project, I am encouraged by the evidence we have uncovered thus far. Nearby sister cities from the MB, such as Tall Kefrein, Tall Nimrin, Tall Bleibel and Tall Mustah complete the biblical picture of the Cities of the Jordan Disk visible from Bethel/Ai.