

# BIBLICAL RESEARCH BULLETIN

The Academic Journal of Trinity Southwest University

ISSN 1938-694X

Volume VII

Number 3

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Steven Collins

### Abstract:

In this paper I demonstrate that in no instance in the OT does *kikkar* refer to a geographical-topographical feature other than the southern Jordan Valley, north of the Dead Sea, and areas contiguous with it.



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Trinity Southwest University (Attn: *BRB*)  
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# Reassessing the Term *hakikkar* in Nehemiah as Bearing on the Location of the Cities of the Plain

Steven Collins

Dean, College of Archaeology,  
Trinity Southwest University

When I originally produced the textual research in conjunction with my (then) little monograph on the possible location of the biblical Cities of the Plain,<sup>1</sup> I provided a detailed analysis of the Hebrew term *kikkar* (ככר), translated by most scholars as “plain” or “region” when used in a geographical sense. At that time, I identified only two—out of a total of thirteen—geographical usages of *kikkar* as perhaps *not* referring specifically to the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea. Recent interaction with Professor Anson Rainey as to the geographical meaning of *kikkar* (“circle, disk”) in the Old Testament has caused me to go back and re-examine those two contexts in which *hakikkar* (הככר) seemed to mean “region” or “area surrounding” (Neh 3:22 and 12:28). This re-assessment has brought me to the conclusion that in all thirteen instances where it is used in a geographical sense, *kikkar* refers exclusively to the area of the roughly circular southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea. Simply stated: in no instance in the OT does *kikkar* refer to a geographical-topographical feature other than the southern Jordan Valley and areas contiguous with it.

Before looking at the two references in question, a brief review of the term *kikkar* is in order.<sup>2</sup> Outside the OT, Semitic *kk*—Akkadian, *kakkaru*; Ugaritic, *kakkaru*; Egyptian, *kerker*—seems to have no geographical application whatsoever. It simply refers either to a “talent” (an ANE monetary unit consisting of a flat, circular disk of metal) or a “tortilla” (a flat, circular loaf of bread common in the ANE—and in the American Southwest, thus my use of the Spanish word). (The Egyptian equivalent can also refer to the symbol created when one “draws a circle in the sand with a stick.”) Of course, the majority of OT usages of *kikkar* are in this vein. Of the 68 appearances of *kikkar* in the OT, 48 refer to a “talent” of metal, and seven refer to a flat, circular “loaf” of bread, for a total of 55 non-geographical uses. This reflects the common non-geographical meaning of *kikkar* amongst the other ANE languages. By comparison to both the general ANE use of the term, and its OT uses, it can only be concluded that any geographical application of the term is rare, if not extremely rare.

Interestingly, all of the non-geographical OT usages of *kikkar* have something in common that most scholars’ discussions of this subject have failed to point out: no definite article (!). When speaking of talents or tortillas, it is simply *kikkar*, whereas beyond the four constructions of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Collins, *The Search for Sodom and Gomorrah* (Albuquerque: TSU Press, 2006). See also S. Collins, “The Geography of the Cities of the Plain,” *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.1 (2002); S. Collins, “A Chronology for the Cities of the Plain,” *BRB* II.8 (2002); S. Collins, “The Architecture of Sodom,” *BRB* II.14 (2002); 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); 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); S. Collins, “Rethinking the Location of Zoar: An Exercise in Biblical Geography,” *BRB* VI.3 (2006); and S. Collins, “Forty Salient Points on the Geography of the Cities of the Kikkar,” *BRB* VII.1 (2007).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the linguistics involved, see S. Collins, “The Geography of the Cities of the Plain,” *BRB* II.1 (2002).

geographical *kikkar* with *hayarden* (הַיַּרְדֵּן), “disk of the Jordan” (as in Gen 13:10-11; 1 Ki 7:46; 2 Ch 4:17), each of the remaining nine geographical applications is *hakikkar*. Thus, it can be stated reasonably that, with the article, *hakikkar* constitutes a reference to a definite geographical area, “THE Kikkar.” And, as I have suggested many times over, the OT writers likely used the term with reference to the southern Jordan Valley because, to the ground-based observer, it appeared as a vast, disk-like spread of agricultural land, made even more dramatic to the eye by the plateaus rising up about its perimeter. Indeed, the southern Jordan Valley widens out into a 25-kilometer-in-diameter disk just north of the Dead Sea—THE Disk (*hakikkar*) proper. The Kikkar is considerably larger if its adjacent watershed (the facing hills) and contiguous areas of the southern Jordan Valley are included.

It could be further suggested that the four geographical uses of *kikkar* linked with *hayarden*—wherein *kikkar* appears without the attached article—are such because they are actually meant to convey the talent/tortilla-like nature of the area, for which a possible translation might be: “Lot looked up and saw that the entire talent/tortilla of the Jordan was well watered...So Lot chose for himself the whole talent/tortilla of the Jordan and set out eastward...and pitched his tents toward Sodom.” Only when linked with *hayarden* (the Jordan) does geographical *kikkar* lose its article. All other geographical appearances of *kikkar* are *hakikkar*, a reference to that specific area of the southern Jordan Valley, in what might be considered an “official” regional designation (such as “the Negev”). Thus, *kikkar hayarden* (כַּכַּר הַיַּרְדֵּן) refers to the flat, circular quality of the southern Jordan Valley, while *hakikkar* (הַכַּכַּר) suggests a definite term referring to the same general geographical area north of the Dead Sea. (In this context, it is also worth mentioning that every single use of *hayarden* in the OT refers to the Jordan River proper, and nothing else.)

A brief “chronological” review of the thirteen OT geographical uses of *kikkar* is appropriate here:

1. Gen 13:10—“Lot...saw...the whole *kikkar hayarden*...”
2. Gen 13:11—“So Lot...chose...the whole *kikkar hayarden*...”
3. Gen 13:12—“...Lot lived among the cities of *hakikkar*...”
4. Gen 19:17—“...don’t...stop anywhere in *hakikkar*.”
5. Gen 19:25—“...[YHWH] overthrew those cities and all of *hakikkar*...”
6. Gen 19:28—“[Abraham] looked down toward...the land of *hakikkar*...”
7. Gen 19:29—“...when [Elohim] destroyed the cities of *hakikkar*...”
8. Deu 34:3—“...*hakikkar* of the valley of Jericho...”
9. 2 Sa 18:23—“...Ahimaaz ran by way of *hakikkar*...”
10. 1 Ki 7:46—“...[objects] cast in clay molds in *kikkar hayarden*...”
11. 2 Ch 4:17—“...[objects] cast in clay molds in *kikkar hayarden*...”
12. Neh 3:22—“...repairs made...by the priests, men of *hakikkar*...”
13. Neh 12:28—“...singers...were brought together...from *hakikkar*, ones from around Jerusalem...”

That the first eleven uses of *kikkar* above refer to the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea is hardly disputable, as I have demonstrated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> But what about #12 and #13? In my former analysis of *hakikkar* from these two contexts in the book of Nehemiah, I more or less capitulated to the idiomatic connotation assigned to it by most translators—something like “region” or “area around.” Generally, *hakikkar* is translated like this (bold letters) in these two verses:

Neh 3:22—“The repairs next to [Eliashib’s house] were made by the priests from **the surrounding region.**”

Neh 12:28-29—“The singers also were brought together from the **region** around Jerusalem...”

But looking closer, I now lean strongly in the direction that *hakikkar* in neither of these contexts means “region” in some general sense, but in both cases refers specifically to the southern Jordan Valley, consistent with all the other geographical uses of *kikkar* in the OT. Such a conclusion can be reached by extending one’s vision over a larger section of the context for each passage. By including additional phrases, and not assuming the meaning “region,” but instead translating *hakikkar* as “the Kikkar” = “the Disk” (= the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea), a meaning consistent with “the Disk of the Jordan” is logical, even preferred:

Neh 2:20-3:23—“...We [God’s] servants will start rebuilding [Jerusalem’s city wall]...Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate...The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them...The next section was rebuilt by the men of Tekoa...Next to them, repairs were made by men from Gibeon and Mizpah...places under the authority of the governor of Trans-Euphrates...The Valley Gate was repaired by Hanun and the residents of Zanoah...Next to him, Meremoth son of Uriah...repaired another section...The repairs next to him were made by the priests from **the Kikkar**. Beyond them, Benjamin and Hashub made repairs in front of their house...”

Neh 12:27-29—“At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication...The sons of **the singers** were brought together, and from **the Kikkar, from around Jerusalem**—from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for **the singers from around Jerusalem** had built villages for themselves.”

In the first Nehemiah passage, there is no reason to understand *hakikkar* as anything other than the southern Jordan Valley, simply as a reference to priests from that area. In the second passage, it is interesting to note that Beth Gilgal, Geba and Azmaveth are all found on the watershed leading down to the Kikkar north of the Dead Sea, and could have been considered as belonging to the Jordan Disk, being in the area contiguous to its western edge (some scholars have placed Beth Gilgal at Gilgal near Jericho). On any count, the phrase in 12:29, “the singers from around Jerusalem” (המשררים סביבות ירושלם) is identical to the same construction found in 12:28, except that in 12:28 the prepositional phrase “and from the Kikkar” is inserted (almost parenthetically) between “singers” and “from around Jerusalem” (המשררים ומן־הככר סביבות ירושלם). Thus, the sentence, “the singers were brought together, and from the Kikkar, from around Jerusalem,” could simply mean that they came from the vicinity of Jerusalem, and also

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<sup>3</sup> Collins, “Geography.”

from the edges of the Jordan Disk. No matter how you slice it, *hakikkar* in both Nehemiah passages is consistent with the area north of the Dead Sea.

Based on an analysis of *kikkar hayarden* and *hakikkar*, I think it is reasonable to conclude that the only possible area included by these terms is the southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea, and perhaps locations contiguous to it. With reference to the location of Sodom and Gomorrah, this analysis seems to exclude any possibility that the Cities of the Plain (*hakikkar*) could have been located in the southeast Dead Sea region.